FATIMA FAYEZ
DEAD WITCH
VALENTINA SANZ - BOOK 1

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Book 1

FATIMA FAYEZ

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About the Author

Chapter One

I was crouched under a crooked stairwell in a corner of El Born seconds away from becoming a dead witch.

The rogue ward hummed as loudly as a wasp's nest. My hands were steady as I traced a rune pattern over the ward and my magic raced to identify the ward's unstable components. A drop of sweat rolled down my forehead into my eyes. I blinked it away. *Almost there.* I bit my lip to stifle the obscenity that nearly flew out my mouth as I realized the ingredient used in the ward's creation.

"I didn't touch it," my client said for the third time. "I swear it, Valentina. One minute it was guarding the door, the next it started crackling like it wanted to bite me."

My client, Mrs. Gilmore, a sharp-eyed werewolf with a knack for tracking but no aptitude for magic, stood above me. Her cat, Fluffy, yowled from the windowsill.

"It's not your fault," I muttered, flicking my fingers quickly drawing nullifying runes into the air. The ward shimmered blue, warning of a powerful backlash, then sputtered. *There.* The glow died. A gentle magical backlash washed over me. Much better than the alternative. The danger was gone. I let out a relieved sigh. "You didn't do anything. It became overloaded because of a faulty component. Where did you get this ward from?"

Mrs. Gilmore had the grace to look embarrassed. "Pedro's Potions. I know you supplied me with security wards but I couldn't take the risk that they didn't work. You know how other werewolves feel about loners like me. We're easy targets for challenges."

I ignored the implied insult. When people were fearful they were desperate. I wasn't in the habit of holding things against desperate people as I was in the same boat.

Fluffy yowled again from the windowsill. I glanced up.

"Poor dear wants to get some air," Mrs. Gilmore moved to the door, swaying a little. "I'm not feeling so well myself at the moment."

"That would be the ward backlash. Sit down for a minute with your head between your knees. Give me a minute to reset my wards before you open that door. I had to de-activate them to focus on this one." I knelt down to start etching the activation runes. Before I could start, I heard the door open. I glanced up and saw Chelsea streak out the front door like her tail was on fire. A blur of white fur bounded up a gnarled old tree across the narrow plaza.

I sighed, brushed the dust off my jeans, and got up. “Please follow my instructions before you topple over.” Mrs. Gilmore gave a nod and dropped by the door, her head forward, as she took in deep breaths. Ward backlash had that impact on some, no matter how gentle it was.

I jogged over to the tree. “Stay there,” I called to Mrs. Gilmore.

I could’ve used a levitation charm, but the ward backlash had already given the air a metallic buzz. No point spooking the cat further. I climbed halfway up and reached for the branch where Chelsea hissed like I’d offended her ancestors.

That’s when I heard a deep snarl behind me.

“What did you do to my aunt?”

I turned my head just in time to see a blur of muscle and denim charging at me. An angry young man lunged toward the tree like I was abducting someone. I yelped, dropped to the grass, and rolled. He followed, shifting mid-lunge. Not full wolf, but claws and fangs sprouted from his fingertips.

“Back off!” I snapped, pulling my slingshot and a wardstone from my belt.

He swiped at me. I ducked, aimed, and fired.

The wardstone cracked midair, releasing a burst of frost-etched ward energy that snapped across his chest and locked him in place like a statue.

He blinked. Shook. Realized he couldn’t move. His body flexed in an effort to break free from my spell and failed. I had created these specialty wards in a miniature size for quick usage for situations like this. They were the size of marbles and I only needed my trusty slingshot to hit my targets. The hotheaded shifter was able to talk but he wouldn’t be able to move until the ward wore off or I deactivated it.

“What the hell?”

Mrs. Gilmore rushed over, gasping. “Kyle! What are you doing?”

“Auntie?” he rasped.

“She’s my warder!” Mrs. Gilmore snapped, glaring up at him. “She was helping me. Fluffy ran into the tree. You nearly attacked her!”

“I—she was—she looked—”

“Like I was rescuing a cat?” I offered dryly, tucking my slingshot back into my belt and dusting off my palms.

He flushed crimson and glared at the ground. “You could’ve said something.”

“After you were done clawing me to death?”

“I wouldn’t have killed you,” he muttered. He flexed his body again, trying to break free. Fluffy had come down from the tree and was rubbing against Kyle’s leg.

Mrs. Gilmore glared at her nephew. “You should be ashamed of

yourself attacking someone like that. You know better than that, you owe her an apology."

Kyle muttered something that might've been one. "There, now let me go."

"I don't think so. You're going to stay there until I'm done activating my wards."

"What? No! Tell her!" He ordered his aunt. "Make her set me free!"

Mrs. Gilmore narrowed her eyes. "No, I think Valentina's right. You could use the time to reflect on how you could have handled the situation in a better way while she finishes her job."

That was why Mrs. Gilmore was one of my favorite clients. For that I would throw in an extra ward free of charge. I walked away from the bickering aunt and nephew and purring cat to finish my work. I'd had enough excitement for the night but it wasn't over yet. I sighed. I would have to make a stop at Pedro's Potions and find out who was selling faulty wards before people got hurt.

But before that I had to meet another client.

Chapter Two

The first rule of staying hidden is to never return to the same place twice. But that was difficult to do if you had to make a living.

The ward in my pocket was burning a hole through the lining of my coat, and the client had insisted we meet in person. At Bar Otis, of all places. I was almost a regular here, I had to be with what I was selling. My surprise was that it had been my client's suggestion to meet here. The moment I stepped through the door, every hair on the back of my neck lifted. I had the same reaction every time I set foot into the place. Dark wood walls soaked in decades of smoke and spilled blood framed the room. Vampires lounged in high-backed booths, their fanged smirks barely visible under the amber lights. A pair of shifters played a dice game near the back, their low growls punctuating the clack of bone on wood. I didn't see my client yet, but I saw trouble brewing, familiar faces that looked too hard and eyes that lingered too long.

Barcelona has plenty of places where the supernatural like to pretend they're human, but Bar Otis never bothered. It was a neutral ground, which in our world just meant no one would kill you without a good reason. Or at least, not in public.

I kept my chin down and my senses open, weaving through the bar like I belonged. I didn't. Not here, not anywhere lately. The ward pulsed with a faint hum against my side—blood magic, subtle and elegant. Designed to seal a room for exactly thirty-three seconds. Just enough time to steal, escape, or kill, depending on your intentions. Mine were clean. Mostly.

"Valentina Sanz."

The voice stopped me cold. It wasn't the name that did it, Valentina was the name I'd borrowed three years ago when I ran, but the tone. Wry, amused, and female. Familiar.

I turned, forcing a smile. "Emma. Fancy seeing you here."

Emma Dench was the kind of witch who smiled while stabbing you. Elegant, clever, and dangerous. She'd made her fortune selling off-brand wards to tourists and desperate young witches who didn't know better. And now she was working the underground again, judging by the sharpness in her eyes. I'd met her when I'd first moved to Barcelona trying to source ingredients for my wards. From time to time she amused herself by poaching my small pool of clients. Despite being here for two years I was still seen as an outsider by the

community, every lost sale was a financial blow. I still hadn't been able to build up my savings to move to another city so I was stuck in Barcelona for the foreseeable future.

She slid off her barstool and walked up to me like we were old friends. "Still playing with blood magic, I see."

"And you're still pretending your knockoff shields aren't killing people."

Her smile twitched. "People like you shouldn't throw stones. Someone might look too closely at your glass house."

"Careful," I murmured, stepping closer. "Glass can cut."

"Is that a threat?" She scoffed. "You always did think you were better than the rest of us. Just because your wards are fancier doesn't make them safer."

"My wards don't backfire and scorch the life out of a teenager trying to defend herself in a back alley."

Emma's eyes narrowed. "That wasn't mine."

"No? Because it sure looked like your signature. Sloppy, incomplete rune binding. Cheap materials. Do you even test them anymore?"

She stepped forward until there were only inches between us, her perfume heavy with sage and something metallic. "You're not my keeper, Valentina. You think hiding in this city gives you the right to come back and lecture me?"

"I think selling unstable wards is a good way to get someone killed. And I don't want your mess traced back to me."

"You think you're better than me?" Emma growled. "You forget I know you're running from your own mess. What faulty ward did you create, I wonder?"

I stiffened. "Walk away, Emma."

We were attracting attention. A few shifters had stopped their game to watch. The bartender, a stooped vampire with milky eyes, reached under the bar for whatever he kept there for moments like this. I didn't want to find out.

Emma looked around, sensing the shift. She leaned in and dropped her voice. "Watch yourself, Valentina. You're not as invisible as you think."

Then she was gone, melting into the crowd.

I exhaled slowly. I went to the booth and sat down, waiting for my client to show up. Emma had no idea how close she was with her accusations. I frowned and wondered if it was time to move despite not having the money. I could restart somewhere else the way I did in Barcelona three years ago. I was nervous about Emma's fixation on me. She would draw attention where I didn't need any. I mulled over my options until my client finally appeared, a narrow-eyed shifter

with expensive shoes and no patience. He was one of those too-rich, too-bored shifters who collected magical trinkets like vintage wine. It was clear he thought being in Bar Otis was slumming it. I briefly wondered why he'd picked the place. We exchanged pleasantries and the ward with minimal fuss. He didn't even question the price.

As I turned to leave, the vampire bartender caught my eye. "Word of advice," he rasped. "Someone's asking about you. Not the usual someone."

My fingers curled around my slingshot on my belt. "Who?"

He gave a bloodless smile. "Alliance agents. They were here an hour ago."

That was the moment I should've left town. But instead, I walked out of that bar with a target on my back, and didn't even know it yet. My mind raced as I went through the implications of Alliance agents asking about me. The Alliance of Supernatural Protectors, Alliance or ASP, was an organization that policed the supernatural community and kept us hidden from humans. There was no reason for them to ask about me, I hadn't committed any crimes. I shouldn't have drawn any attention. I bit my lip. Maybe it was time to cut everything lose and run before it was too late. I shook my head. The people hunting me would never resort to official channels. They wouldn't want their crimes to come to light. They had their own methods for tracking witches like me. I've been lucky to have remained hidden as long as I have but I was probably overreacting. My disappearance would definitely draw attention.

Outside, the air clung heavy with summer humidity. I paused on the sidewalk beneath the flickering neon wolf sign, instinct prickling. Something wasn't right. The street was too quiet for this part of El Raval.

I slipped my hand into my coat pocket, fingers brushing against my collection of wardstones until my fingers felt the marks that denoted a shielding charm. It pulsed, faint and urgent.

A figure stood across the street, half-shadowed beneath a broken streetlamp. Lean. Hooded. Watching.

I kept walking, casual. Turned left toward the side alley. The moment I passed the bakery, I spun and slid into the shadows.

The figure followed.

When they reached the alley's mouth, I whispered the activation word. My shielding charm shimmered faintly between us like a pane of glass.

"Come on," I murmured. "Let's see who you are."

The figure hesitated, then stepped forward—into the glow of the streetlamp.

Young. Early twenties, maybe. Pale. Not a vampire, his eyes were

too human. But his coat bore the faint silver embroidery I recognized from the Alliance's lower-tier field agents.

I memorized his face. He wasn't here for a drink.

He looked around once, then vanished into the dark.

I stayed there another ten minutes, counting the heartbeats. My own. The city's. The hum of a storm in the distance.

Then I turned and walked away. I tried to ignore all the reasons why I had to grab my belongings and run away from the city.

Chapter Three

Pedro's Potions smelled like rosemary, rotting seaweed, and something faintly metallic—like blood scraped off an old coin. It wasn't the worst-smelling ward shop in Barcelona, but it was in the running for the top three. I liked Pedro though. He paid on time and didn't ask questions. Usually.

Today, I wished he'd asked a few.

Sunlight filtered through the grimy windows in watery slats, catching on glass vials and charm chains strung across the low wooden ceiling. The place looked more chaotic than usual, like a magicked tornado had swept through and rearranged everything alphabetically by accident. Pedro had started his shop years ago selling his custom potions and expanded into selling other items, mainly charms, wards, and other magical tools. Despite the smell, he never was at a loss for customers. I'd started supplying him with my customized wards a couple of years ago and he managed to sell them quicker than the other places I worked with.

I had just stepped inside to deliver a customized perimeter ward, when I heard the too-sweet voice that made my teeth ache.

"Emma Dench." Of course I had the misfortune of seeing her two days running.

She was standing by the front counter, hands elegantly folded over her faux-leather spellbook, talking Pedro into stocking her new line of 'affordable security charms.' Pedro's eyebrows were doing this uncertain twitch they always did when he smelled something off but couldn't place it.

"Emma," I said, loud enough to turn heads. "Selling trash in daylight now?"

She turned to me, a wide fake smile planted on her face. "Valentina. How delightful for me to run into you again so quickly. Still working out of alleyways and pretending you're better than everyone else?"

"No pretending. Just better."

A couple of customers browsing the charm racks looked over. One of them, a bored-looking wizard in a vintage band t-shirt, let out a low whistle. Pedro gave me a nervous look but didn't interrupt. Smart man.

I crossed the floor in three strides and tapped one of Emma's shimmering amulets laid out on a silk cloth. The charm pulsed faintly

with a flickering red glow, uneven and erratic. “This one’s rigged wrong. If someone actually used it during a break-in, it wouldn’t stop the intruder. It’d set their kitchen on fire and probably their living room too.”

Emma’s smile was brittle. “All charms carry risk. People know that.”

“Not when you don’t warn them,” I replied harshly.

“Now, Valentina, there’s no need to get so heated. We’re all friends here. I’m sure Emma wouldn’t sell me faulty wards,” Pedro interjected trying to smooth things over. He turned to her, “Isn’t that right, Emma? These are merely samples, yes?”

“Of course,” she said. She lay a hand on his arm. “I would never sell you defunct wards and risk jeopardizing our relationship.”

Pedro’s chest puffed out, falling for her flirtations. Emma smirked.

“Really? I had to nullify a security ward from blowing up Mrs. Gilmore’s house only yesterday. A security ward sold from this shop. Suddenly I think I know who supplied the ward.”

“Now, now, Valentina, you can’t be throwing out accusations like that. You don’t know that ward was sold from my shop. I haven’t seen Mrs. Gilmore in months. Years!” Pedro’s eyes darted around the place, trying for some damage control in front of the customers.

I ignored him, glaring at Emma. “You’re selling broken wards to people who don’t know better. Keep it up, and someone’s going to die. Or worse for you, someone’s going to kill you for it.”

Gasps echoed from the back corner, drawing my attention. A young witch with blue streaks in her hair dropped the charm she was holding. It clattered against the tile floor and rolled beneath a display shelf. Two other witches gaped at me. A woman holding a cane frowned. A wiry man in a patched cloak stepped forward, brow furrowed. “She’s doing her best. Not all of us can afford your custom work, you know. Some of us have to take what we can get.”

I turned on him. “She’s not giving you a deal. She’s selling snake oil wrapped in rune paper. That charm you’re holding? It could’ve ruptured your ward line and burned down your place.”

He flushed and looked at the charm in his hand like it had just grown fangs.

“I’ve patched up too many faulty wards this month. I’ve cleaned blood off wards that should’ve protected someone. If you think it’s about price, you’re missing the point.”

Emma raised her voice just enough to be heard. “People deserve options.”

“They deserve safety,” I snapped. “Not illusions.”

Pedro cleared his throat, raising his hands. “Ladies, maybe we could…”

“Stay out of it, Pedro,” we said in unison. He lowered his hands.

Emma gathered her things with excessive calm, sliding her wards back into her velvet case like precious gems. “We’ll see each other again, Valentina. And next time, it won’t be so public.”

“I’m counting on it,” I said, folding my arms.

The doorbell chimed as she exited, tension trailing behind her like perfume.

I turned to him. “Was Mrs. Gilmore’s security ward one of hers?”

“Yes,” Pedro sighed.

“You aren’t seriously going to buy more of her trash, are you?”

“No, I suppose not when you’ve accused her so loudly in front of all the clients.” Pedro said.

I narrowed my eyes. “It’s unethical. You have a responsibility for your clients.”

“I also have a responsibility to keep my family fed,” Pedro said mildly. “Now turn over the custom ward and let’s get you paid and out of here before I lose any more customers.”

My second delivery of the day took me across town, past the Gothic Quarter’s looming stone buildings and into the shadowy calm near the Roman walls behind Plaça Nova. The sun had dipped below the skyline, casting long amber beams across the plazas and cloaking the alleyways in soft violet gloom.

Dorian's townhouse was a sharp contrast to Pedro’s shop. Every surface gleamed. The air smelled faintly of bergamot and old leather, with an undertone that clung to the back of my throat.

He was waiting in his office, seated beside a marble fireplace with a tumbler of something too red and too thick to be wine. He wore a dark tailored suit that probably cost more than my entire wardrobe and looked like he’d stepped off a fashion runway. He was old enough to be able to withstand daylight hours if not daylight itself. The windows were shuttered and heavy curtains drawn to avoid any accidental infiltration.

“Valentina,” he said smoothly. “Punctual, as always.”

“As was your payment. The perimeter ward you requested,” I said, handing over the runestone wrapped in plain brown paper.

He accepted it with a reverent nod, rolling it between his fingers like it was a sacred relic. “This should keep our thresholds quiet. The house has become...popular lately.”

“Undead fan club?” I quipped.

Dorian smirked faintly. “Something like that. House Corvini was impressed with your work. They’d like to establish a more formal

relationship."

I shook my head. "No."

His smile faltered. "That was fast."

"I don't do politics. And I don't work for vampire councils." While I had several vampire clients I tried to avoid any official work. Working with any of the vampire Houses in an official capacity meant I would be immediately aligned with some Houses. I would lose my neutrality within the vampire community. I had enough problems with the vampires. I didn't need more.

"It wouldn't be politics. Merely...security work. Consultations. The occasional specialty ward."

I met his gaze. "I'm flattered. Still no."

He tilted his head. "You've made enemies, Valentina. Aligning with us would provide a certain...insulation."

"I know what your insulation costs." I'd paid the price before. Never again.

A long silence stretched between us. He nodded once, then slipped the ward into a small obsidian box.

"We'll keep your name on the books. Just in case."

"Don't."

I left before he could respond.

Twilight had fully claimed the sky by the time I reached the edge of the Gothic Quarter. Street lamps flickered to life one by one, painting the cobblestones in pools of amber light. The air smelled like roasting chestnuts and the sea.

I was walking east, weaving between tourists and locals, when I noticed the rhythm of footsteps that didn't belong. Not hurried. Not slow. Just…off.

At first I ignored it. Could've been anyone.

But when I turned down a quiet side street, the feeling didn't go away. The hairs on my neck stood at attention, and the ward pendant tucked beneath my shirt pulsed once, faint and warning.

I ducked into a shadowed alley near Carrer del Bisbe and waited.

Ten seconds later, a man emerged from the crowd. Short dark hair, pale skin, and a coat far too heavy for the warm evening. His steps were too measured. His eyes swept the alley like he expected me to vanish.

He didn't see me. Not yet.

I held my breath.

He paused at the mouth of the alley. Looked left, then right. Then he kept walking.

I waited another full minute, listening to the rhythm of the city. My heart. The buzz of a distant tram. Laughter spilling out of a nearby café.

When I finally stepped back into the light, the street was empty.

But the ward pendant still pulsed against my chest.

I was being hunted. Again.

Chapter Four

Miguel's was tucked between a dry cleaner and a cursed antique shop, marked only by a flickering sign that buzzed louder than the conversations inside. It was a neighborhood place for those who didn't quite belong anywhere else, vampires passing through, shifters who hadn't pledged to a pack, hedge witches on the run, and one extremely tired ward-crafter trying to outrun her past.

I pushed through the door and was immediately greeted by the familiar scent of garlic, lemon, and something caramelized that made my stomach growl. The lighting was low, the music soft and jazz-adjacent, and the clientele just strange enough to be comfortable.

Keke spotted me the moment I stepped in.

"Hey, Red," she called, waving from behind the bar. Her black braids were pulled into a crown, and her gold eyeliner glittered like ward sparks. She poured something bright into a glass without looking. "Rough night?"

I slumped onto the stool. "I yelled at a con artist, turned down a vampire job, and got followed halfway through the Gothic Quarter."

"So a normal Tuesday."

"I'm starting to think Barcelona's trying to kill me."

"Sweetheart," Keke said, handing me a glass, "Barcelona's trying to kill everyone. That's what keeps the drinks strong."

I took a long sip and let the warmth spread through my chest. Keke was one of the few people who didn't flinch at my magic or pry too deeply. Maybe that's why I hadn't warded her away yet.

"You hear anything?" I asked. "About weird ward surges or backlash? Someone's selling volatile junk, and it's leaving a trail."

"Oh honey," Keke leaned in, eyes sparkling. "You know I hear everything. People whispering about unstable wards, power spikes near Montjuïc, even rumors about the Council sniffing around mortal politics. And get this—someone said a witch caught fire mid-ritual outside a club in Gràcia last week."

I winced. "Any names?"

"No one they'd admit. Just whispers. That's the thing about this town. The walls don't talk, but the shadows gossip like old aunties at a funeral."

I smiled despite myself. I leaned back, letting the clink and murmur of the bar wash over me. It was moments like these that made me forget I was running from everything, that I hadn't had a

real friend in years because trust meant exposure. And exposure meant death.

Keke tapped the bar twice. “If you’re talking about who I think you are then you should probably know she’s in here tonight.”

My stomach sank. “Who?”

“Emma Dench. Corner booth. VIP treatment.”

Of course.

I groaned into my drink. “I cannot escape this woman.”

Keke laughed. “Maybe she’s your karmic twin.”

“If she’s my twin, one of us was adopted by demons.” I sighed and stood. “I’ll be in my usual spot. Just give me a minute to decompress before I pretend to be social.”

“Knock yourself out.”

I wove through the tables, heading for the booth I always used, back wall, left side, close to the fire exit. Predictable but defendable. The kind of habit I should’ve broken but never had.

Only this time, someone was already there.

Emma Dench.

At first I thought she was sleeping. Head tilted slightly to the side, hands folded in her lap, her velvet spellbook resting beside her untouched drink. Her hair was too perfectly styled for someone lounging casually.

Something cold crawled down my spine.

I stepped closer. Her chest didn’t rise.

“Emma?” I said.

No response.

I circled the table slowly, dread coiling tighter with each step. Her lips were parted just slightly, a faint line of blood trailing from her nose. Her eyes stared past me, wide and glassy.

“Emma,” I whispered again, softer this time.. This couldn’t be happening. Emma wasn’t dead.

A shadow moved behind me. Keke’s voice broke the silence.

“Oh no,” she breathed. “Is she...?”

I nodded once. “Yeah.”

Keke turned around and disappeared. My mind raced. I studied Emma and everything around her careful to not step close or touch anything. It was clear the death was unnatural. Someone behind me cried out, “Emma!” and something clattered to the ground. I turned around and found a cane lying on the ground, a woman holding her hand to her mouth eyes wide open in shock.

“What have you done? You killed her!” She accused me, her eyes alight with malice.

“It wasn’t me,” I said. Anxiety coursed through my body. I had no way to prove it.

“Of course she didn’t,” Keke snapped, back at my side.

I shot her a grateful look. I had walked away from her for a few minutes. She had no way to prove it. Anxiety increased.

The next five minutes blurred. I stayed standing until the Alliance agents arrived.

They moved like shadows, slick suits, silver pins, eyes that didn’t blink enough. They scanned the room with runes and cold disdain.

“Name?” one of them asked.

“Valentina Sanz,” I said automatically.

He raised an eyebrow. “You were seen arguing with the deceased earlier today.”

“Yes. She was selling dangerous magic.” I wondered how they’d known so quickly. They would soon find out I was telling the truth.

“We’ll take that into account.”

Another agent tapped a crystal. “She’s marked. Runic residue matches the wards found at two other volatile sites.”

“That’s impossible,” I argued.

The cuffs were on me before I could finish the sentence. Magic-dampening, cold iron lined.

“You’re under investigation for magical tampering, unlicensed ward sales, and suspicion of murder.”

Keke stepped forward. “She didn’t do it! Val’s not a murderer!”

“Ma’am, please stay back.”

They pulled me toward the door.

As I crossed the threshold, I looked back once. Keke was still watching. Her face stricken, hands balled into fists at her sides.

I didn’t say anything.

What could I say?

I hadn’t killed Emma Dench.

But the wards I used to make might’ve.

And that was almost worse.

Chapter Five

The Alliance didn't operate out of a sleek tower or a foreboding castle. No, their headquarters in Barcelona was housed in a discreet building. Layers of enchantments older than anyone on the payroll covered the building. The place hummed with power and secrecy. It was a place I had avoided at all costs and now I was walked in with handcuffs on my wrists.

The stone-walled interrogation chamber was colder than it needed to be, a deliberate discomfort. It smelled faintly of salt and sage, and the overhead lights flickered like they were deciding whether or not to interrogate me too. My wrists itched from the cold iron cuffs, and the magic-dampening field pressed down on my skin like a second, ill-fitting body. It muted everything, my wards, my senses, even the little instinct that normally whispered when I was being lied to.

Across from me sat an agent in a slate-grey suit and wire-framed glasses. Dark eyes, buzzed hair, not a single loose thread on his entire person. His aura was tightly contained, but I could feel the edge of it brushing mine like a blade testing for weakness. He was methodical, exact, and utterly uninterested in small talk.

Next to him stood someone far more dangerous.

Younger, sharper, messier. Dark brown hair just long enough to curl over his collar. His jacket hung open, tie loose, shirt rolled up to the elbows like he'd been pulled from something more interesting and resented it. He leaned against the wall like he owned it, arms crossed and expression unreadable.

The first agent placed a file on the table. "Valentina Sanz. Witch. Specializes in custom wards. No formal registration with the Alliance. No known coven affiliation. No verified lineage."

I shrugged. "That's all correct. I freelance."

He tapped the file. "We ran your documentation through five cross-reference systems. Your identity has no verifiable roots past six years ago."

I kept my face neutral. "I lost everything in a fire."

"Convenient."

"Traumatic," I corrected. I wasn't lying. It had been traumatic to run away from my past and create a new identity. I had been living in fear for the past three years that someone was going to find me and drag me back.

The second agent made a soft sound, somewhere between a laugh

and a scoff. “You’re good.”

His partner didn’t react. “Where did you learn wardcraft at this level?”

“Practice,” I said, not breaking eye contact.

“That’s not an answer.”

“It’s the only one you’re getting.”

The second agent finally spoke again, his voice rough velvet. “You know, if I had a credit for every witch who claimed to be self-taught, I could retire in Majorca.”

“Jealous?” I asked.

He tilted his head, grinning like a wolf with secrets. “Curious.”

The first agent pressed on, irritation seeping into his words. “The wards found near the deceased match a signature present at two other magical incidents in the last month.”

I leaned forward, eyes narrowing. “So your evidence suggests I’m sloppy enough to use my own magical fingerprint at a crime scene, and skilled enough to fool your diviners while doing it?”

The second agent laughed softly. “She’s got a point.”

The first glared at him. “Agent Dench—”

Dench. Of course.

“Related to Emma?” I asked.

He shrugged. “Cousin. Didn’t like her. Don’t worry, I recused myself from the investigation.”

The first agent pinched the bridge of his nose. “Why are you even in here?”

“To observe,” Dench said innocently. Then he glanced at me. “And maybe get a read on the woman everyone keeps whispering about.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Getting what you came for?”

His smile turned slow and deliberate. “Not yet. But I’m intrigued.”

A beat passed between us, something taut and unexpected. I felt my pulse shift, annoyed by how interesting I suddenly found him.

The first agent cleared his throat. “We’re not amused, Ms. Sanz. This is serious.”

“So am I,” I said, leaning back. “Keep digging. Maybe you’ll uncover something real instead of wasting time with smoke and mirrors.”

Dench watched me like he saw through the smoke. And maybe he did.

They released me two hours later. Not because they believed me, but because they couldn’t hold me. No charges. No warrants. Just the stink of suspicion clinging to my coat.

A plainclothes agent followed me out of the building and tailed me for five blocks before I lost him in a subway transfer. Amateurs.

Still, the unease stayed with me. Being on their radar wasn’t just

uncomfortable, it was dangerous. The Alliance didn't need a conviction to ruin your life. All it took was one whispered rumor passed to the right ears.

I headed back toward Miguel's, needing answers more than sleep. The murder had happened too quickly, too cleanly. And I couldn't shake the feeling that Emma's death wasn't just about bad magic, it was about sending a message.

By the time I returned to the bar, it had been cordoned off with magical wards and tape that shimmered red under moonlight. The crowd had thinned, but there were plenty of supernaturals around. I skirted the perimeter, slipping into the alley behind the building where deliveries came in. The security spells were basic, probably Alliance-issued, set up by junior agents who hadn't expected someone with my experience to come nosing around.

I slipped through the basic spells, and entered through the kitchen. I moved carefully, tracing my steps back to the booth where Emma had been sitting. Her body was gone, but the lingering aura of death clung to the space like smoke. I crouched beside the table, fingers brushing the floor.

That's when I saw it.

Barely visible, just a faint scorch mark between the floorboards, singed into the wood beneath where her chair had been. A glyph.

Old. Intricate. Meant to be concealed.

I muttered a spell to enhance magical residue. The lines glowed a dull violet, twisting inward like a spiral, surrounded by jagged script I didn't recognize.

Definitely not Emma's work.

And it wasn't mine either.

I stood slowly, heart hammering. Whoever had done this wanted it to look like sloppy warding. But this...this was precision.

And that raised the worst question of all, who would want Emma dead?

She was greedy, yes. Reckless. A liar who wrapped her charisma in velvet and sold power like candy, but she wasn't stupid. Emma knew who not to cross, and she never stepped on toes unless she could bribe or charm her way back into favor. Which meant this wasn't a business feud gone wrong. This was personal.

Maybe one of her clients had finally paid the price for one of her defective wards and decided to return the favor. Or maybe she'd sold to the wrong buyer, someone she thought she could handle and couldn't. Someone who didn't just want her gone, but wanted a message left in her place.

Then again, it could have been the vampires. The political kind. The ones who didn't like noise, especially from witches who weren't

sanctioned or loyal.

But what gnawed at me most was the thought that this glyph, the way it was buried just deep enough to escape casual notice, wasn't just about silencing Elena.

It was about pointing a finger at me.

A warning, maybe. Or a calling card.

Either way, someone had gone to a lot of trouble to frame me.

And I'd just stepped right into their game.

Chapter Six

I didn't go home. I went to the only place where I knew the vampires would be watching.

House Corvini's Barcelona estate wasn't a mansion so much as a restored palace. It perched above the city like a crown, ancient stone softened by modern enchantments. The very air smelled like blood and jasmine. Gargoyles tracked movement. That gave me pause. Everyone knew gargoyles were the worst gossips. I wouldn't have thought House Corvini would want their business or visitors talked about. I wondered to myself if gargoyles would sign non-disclosure agreements. I moved cautiously to the gates.

I'd barely stepped onto the front path when a pair of vampire guards materialized in front of me. Their suits were black, their eyes red-ringed. One sniffed and grimaced. "Witch."

"Tell Claude I'm here." As far as I was aware, Claude Corvini was the head of the House. If there was an offer to be made I'd go straight to the source, I wouldn't deal with anyone else.

"About time," a voice drawled behind them. Claude himself stood under the arch, arms crossed. "You've been dancing around our offer. I knew you'd come to your senses."

He wasn't what I expected. He was the tallest vampire I'd met. His dark eyes seemed to read my mind. Vampire stares were probably where the rumors had started about mind-reading. They had a way of staring right through you.

"I'm willing to hear you out," I said.

He turned on his heel and made his way toward large doors. I followed him inside. The parlor was wide filled with large overstuffed couches. Dim lighting, velvet everything, and air thick with history and unspoken threats. Claude poured himself a drink—something red, naturally—and gestured for me to sit. I didn't. He sat back on an armchair and perused me with his dark eyes.

"We're prepared to offer you protection," he said, swirling the liquid in his glass. "In exchange for a custom ward. One of...exceptional rarity."

I crossed my arms. "Define 'protection.'"

"Our resources. Legal assistance. Interference with Alliance scrutiny. Certain... assurances. You'd be under House Corvini's shield."

"I'm not looking to be anyone's charity case." I was tempted though. The legal assistance would come in handy if charges of

murder were raised against me.

"Nor would you be. It's an exchange of value."

"And the ward?"

He smiled slowly. "Soul-binding."

I felt the chill snake up my spine. Of course it was. "No."

"You haven't heard the terms." His face held back repressed laughter.

"I don't need to. I don't make those."

"You've made one before."

I narrowed my eyes. "And I destroyed it."

"Yes," he said, taking a sip of his drink. "But not before someone saw it work. Someone very influential."

My thoughts ran ahead of me, calculating. Soul-binding wards were outlawed for a reason. Permanent, inescapable. Designed to cage a soul inside a vessel or lock a supernatural being to an object or body. Dangerous magic that was rare and forbidden for many reasons.

"You think I'll be desperate enough to agree," I said.

"Desperation hasn't hit you yet," Claude said smoothly. "But it's coming."

I paced a slow arc across the room, boots quiet on the velvet runner. Part of me considered it, the escape route, the buffer against the Alliance breathing down my neck. The promise of power and protection, if I just gave up a little of my soul in the shape of someone else's. I'd been offered worse.

But the rest of me, the part that still remembered what it felt like to watch a soul scream as it was locked away, shoved the thought down and lit it on fire.

"I'll be cleared," I said, turning to face him. "I'm not taking a leash from your House just because the Alliance is twitchy. I'm not Emma."

"No," Claude said, setting down his glass. "But she had powerful friends. A reputation. Influence. And she's still dead."

That gave me a pause. Not because he was wrong, but because he was right.

"She didn't know how to protect herself," I said quietly. Most of her wards were junk. It wasn't that she didn't have the knowledge. It was pure arrogance and carelessness. It was also a reflection of our times, this ability for rich powerful people to get away with doing the bare minimum and get paid outrageously for it. Failing upward and all of that. Maybe it wasn't just a symptom of our times. Maybe this is the way the world has always been. The rich got away with everything, while the poor suffered the results.

"She thought she did," he replied. "Until someone proved otherwise."

We stared at each other. No more words. Just the sharp, inevitable

silence between two people who both knew how the world worked.

I turned on my heel. “We’re done.”

“You haven’t heard the terms,” Claude rose from his seat.

“Not a chance. You want to collar your enemies or your pets, do it with your own magic. I’m not your leash-maker.”

He didn’t argue. He just watched me with those heavy, ancient eyes like he knew I’d be back.

I left through the way we’d come in, navigating the corridors alone. I hadn’t gotten ten steps down the marble hall before a vampire stepped from the shadows, nearly brushing my shoulder. He was my height, lean, dressed in non-descript clothing. No House insignia. But I recognized his face. The hallway suddenly felt narrower.

“You’re supposed to be dead,” I said.

He smiled. “And you’re not supposed to be Valentina. Imagine my surprise when I saw you sauntering through those gates.”

I didn’t move. “What do you want?”

He stepped back, hands raised in mock surrender. “Just a reminder. Not all ghosts stay buried. And not all favors are forgotten.”

Then he vanished, leaving the air colder in his wake.

I stood there for a long minute, heart racing.

My past had officially caught up with me.

I wondered if he’d shared my true identity with any members of House Corvini. I slowly realized that of course he hadn’t. If he had, I wouldn’t be breathing anymore. I’d be dead. They’d have wanted revenge.

Chapter Seven

By the time dawn broke over the tiled rooftops of the city, I was exhausted, but sleep wasn't an option. I needed to reset, to pretend for a few hours that life hadn't spun itself into a trap.

So I did something normal. Or tried to.

The Sant Antoni market was already buzzing by midmorning. Sunlight spilled across the striped awnings and warmed the polished iron bones of the old Mercat. Steam rose from carts of hot churros, and the smell of saffron, grilled peppers, and fresh bread mingled in the air like a charm of contentment. But beneath the scent of olives and warm pan con tomate, something bitter lingered—me.

I tugged my hood forward and wound my way through the crowd. The mosaic-tiled floor clicked beneath my boots. Locals bartered in rapid-fire Catalan, tourists tried to look like they belonged, and supernatural clients, hidden behind charms and glamour, mingled unseen. The market was a crossroads, one of the few truly neutral spaces left. That made it sacred. And dangerous.

I approached a stall at the back near the old stone arch, where jars of dried herbs lined tiered shelves in perfect balance. It belonged to George and Laurie, retired wizards who still grew half the city's enchanted flora in rooftop gardens with forbidden soil.

Laurie looked up and winced. "Valentina."

George straightened behind the counter. "You're brave, showing your face here today."

I pulled a folded list from my pocket and laid it on the counter. "Need black thistle, ironroot, and two pinches of summerfire. No substitutions."

Laurie didn't move. "You know people have been talking."

"People always talk," I muttered.

"This is different," George said gently. "You were seen with Emma. Arguing at Pedro's Potions. Loudly. Then she ends up dead."

I bristled. "I didn't kill her."

"No one's saying you did," George replied, his eyes kind. "But you know how stories grow in this city. A whisper becomes gospel by lunchtime."

I looked over my shoulder. Sure enough, two stalls down, a pair of younger witches were watching me. When I met their eyes, they quickly turned away, one whispered something and the other actually flinched.

Then, as if fate couldn't resist twisting the knife, a middle-aged woman stepped up to the stall beside me. Her hands hovered over a jar of powdered hawthorn, and she turned to ask Laurie a question, then saw my face.

Her expression shifted. Recognition. Alarm.

She took a step back. "You're her. The one who—"

"I didn't kill Emma Dench," I said flatly.

She shook her head and backed away faster than I could finish the sentence, disappearing into the crowd like I'd just cursed her bloodline.

I felt the eyes. Not just curious. Afraid.

It hit me harder than I expected.

I wasn't some fragile thing. I'd built my life from broken pieces, stitched my freedom together with wards and lies and grit. But this? Being looked at like a monster in the one place I came to feel normal? It cracked something open inside me.

I clenched my fists, jaw tight enough to ache.

"This isn't just gossip," I said quietly. "This could draw attention. The kind I can't afford."

"We know," George said, sliding the thistle and root into brown parchment. "But there's only so much we can do. Some customers are already asking if we'll be 're-evaluating our supplier relationships.'" He said it with air quotes and a look of disgust. "But others might pull away completely. Soon."

Laurie lowered his voice. "You know Emma stirred things up before. She wasn't just reckless, she was arrogant. She sold warded love charms to a vampire liaison last year that turned obsessive. He had to be put down. And remember that fire at the warehouse in Poble-sec?"

I nodded slowly. "She claimed it was sabotage."

"Could've been," George said. "But she made enemies. The kind who don't send warnings, just death."

"So why pin it on me?" I asked, more to the air than to them. "What good does it do to drag my name into it?"

Laurie met my gaze. "Because you fought her. Because she hated you. Because maybe someone thinks you're the easy story."

I swallowed hard. My hands curled around the paper-wrapped herbs, the tension in my shoulders heavier than it had been when I walked in.

"I stayed out of politics for a reason," I said. "I just want to work, stay quiet, be left alone."

"That's not how it works anymore," Laurie said. "Not with a murder this public. Not when the Alliance is sniffing around. You know what they'll do if they don't find a suspect fast."

I did. They'd invent one.

For a moment I just stood there, letting the weight of everything sink in—the cold gaze of Alliance agents, the ghostly whisper of a name I hadn't heard in years, the vampires and their insidious deals, and now the way my world was shrinking around me like a noose.

"I thought if I laid low, it would blow over," I whispered.

Laurie reached across the counter and touched my hand. "You can't hide from this one. You have to find out who really did it. Before they decide it was you."

The city rang around me, voices, clanging carts, the distant bells of a passing tram. The colors were too bright, the smells too sharp, and for a second, I felt like I was watching myself from a distance, a shadow pretending to be a woman. I didn't want attention. I didn't want anyone looking too closely. That was the rule. The sacred rule. Stay small, stay quiet, stay invisible. I'd given up birthdays, friendships, real names—anything that might tie me to the girl I used to be.

And still, here I was. A whispered name in the marketplace. A face people turned from.

But I was already center stage.

And if I didn't solve this murder, I wasn't going to make it out of this alive.

Chapter Eight

I didn't even make it two blocks from the market before trouble found me again.

She was leaning against a lamppost near a newsstand, arms crossed like she'd been waiting for hours, though knowing Daisy, she'd probably just arrived and made it look that way. Her black boots were scuffed, her jacket was scuffed worse, and the clove cigarette tucked behind one ear had long since burned out. But her eyes? Sharp as ever.

"Hey, hot mess," she said, smirking. "Going for the record on how many times you can piss off an entire city in one week?"

"Not in the mood, Daisy."

"Good. Then you won't waste time pretending you've got this under control."

She fell into step beside me like we were just two friends out for a stroll instead of a scandalized witch and a supernatural investigator walking the edge of disaster.

"Emma's death? It's a spider web. You're caught in the center, and the Alliance is pulling the strings."

I gave her a side-eye. "You rehearsed that line?"

"I have a whole monologue if you keep being difficult."

I exhaled through my nose, half amused, half annoyed. "What do you want, Daisy?"

"To help. And not just out of the goodness of my heart."

"Didn't think so."

She grinned. "Let's say I owe a favor to someone who's very interested in keeping you breathing. If you get hauled in by the Alliance, that favor gets messy. And I hate messy."

My steps slowed. "Who's your mystery benefactor?"

Daisy just winked. "Classified. For now."

I walked in silence, tension curling in my chest. Daisy wasn't exactly trustworthy, but she wasn't the type to offer help without reason either. That made her dangerous, but maybe useful.

"You need backup," she said again. "Whether you like it or not."

"I don't like it."

"Figured."

We ended up at a rooftop café tucked between chimneys and satellite dishes, the kind of place Daisy called 'secure' because she'd layered it with more wards than a paranoid dragon's hoard. Every

table was subtly enchanted, the ward-lines carved into the wrought iron railings disguised as floral motifs. The breeze carried the faint scent of roasting garlic from the restaurant below and a trace of ozone from her overclocked protections.

She dropped into a chair with the kind of dramatic sigh that said she hadn't sat still in days. Her boots thunked against the ledge.

"So," she said, stretching out, "you gonna let me help, or are you planning to die stubborn?"

I sat across from her, arms folded. "I don't want a partner."

"Cool. Neither do I. But I hate funerals. Too many speeches and not enough wine."

I snorted despite myself. "Why are you really helping me?"

"Besides the mysterious favor?" Daisy leaned forward. "Let's say I've been chasing a few leads. Emma crossed people. Dangerous people. Some of them might've hired me once. If someone out there's killing loose ends, I don't want to be on the list. Helping you helps me."

There it was. Paranoia wrapped in practicality. That I could respect. Still, someone out there wanted me alive. Enough to send Daisy. Enough to get involved. Why? The memory of Agent Dench's crooked grin flashed in my mind. The way he'd looked at me. Curious. Interested. Like he knew something no one else did. Could it be him? Could he be the reason Daisy was suddenly invested? No. That was ridiculous. He was Alliance. If he was interested in anything, it was leverage, not loyalty. But the question lingered. Who would want to help me, and why? I didn't believe in the kindness of strangers. Help always had a price.

"You're quiet," Daisy said, eyes narrowing.

"Just wondering who your puppet master is."

She laughed. "Wouldn't you like to know."

"Wouldn't you like to tell me?" I countered.

Her smile faded for half a second, just long enough to show she was considering it. Then she shrugged. "Not yet. Let's just say they think your life has more story to tell."

That was somehow more terrifying than knowing.I wanted to say no. I wanted to slam the door shut and tell her to walk away. But the marketplace had already shown me the truth. I was out of places to hide. I leaned forward, elbows on the table. "You ever trust someone and regret it?"

Daisy nodded slowly. "Yeah. Once. And it nearly got me killed. But I also know that going solo in a storm gets you struck by lightning."

"Great. So this is weather forecasting now?"

She grinned. "Only the part where I bring the umbrella."

Despite myself, I laughed. Short, quiet, but real. "I don't even

know what I'm looking for yet," I admitted. "Emma had enemies. Clients. Lovers. She stirred up more trouble than a shifter in heat. But someone made it look like me."

"Then we find the clients. Track her last deals. See who hated her enough to kill her and smart enough to set you up. Bonus points if they're stupid enough to think we won't fight back."

I looked at Daisy for a long second. She looked back, unblinking.

"Fine," I muttered. "We team up. Temporary."

Daisy grinned and raised an imaginary glass. "To temporary cooperation, mutual paranoia, and a shared desire to not get murdered."

She added, voice lower now, more sincere: "And maybe not being so alone in it."

As the sky dimmed into dusk, Daisy walked me partway back toward my apartment, neutral ground between her chaos and mine. The silence between us wasn't uncomfortable. Just heavy.

"You should know," she said, suddenly serious, "Owen was asking about you."

My pulse spiked. "Which Owen?" I really hoped it wasn't the Owen I thought it was. He wasn't supposed to be anywhere near here.

Daisy gave me a long look. "You know which Owen. He's been poking around. Not official, yet. But the Alliance is building a case. They're waiting for the right moment. Or the wrong one. Depending how you see it."

I swallowed hard. "He was supposed to be gone. Transferred to Lisbon."

"He's back. And he doesn't like witches with missing records and unexplained power spikes."

I looked up at the rooftops, red tiles glowing in the last light. "If Owen starts digging into who I really am..."

"He will," Daisy said. "So we better find the killer before he finds you."

I hesitated. "You're awfully calm about me not being who I say I am."

Daisy shrugged. "You think you're the only one walking around in a borrowed name? Half the city's got secrets. I don't care what you did before. I care what you do now. And right now, you're in the middle of something big, and I don't plan on letting it take me down too."

I studied her for a moment. No judgment. No prying. Just that same chaotic resolve. She might be reckless, but she wasn't cruel.

For now, that was enough.

"All right," I said quietly. "Let's find the bastard who set me up."

Chapter Nine

Emma's warding studio was tucked above a pawn shop in El Raval, the kind of building that had survived two fires, a vampire turf war, and possibly the invention of black powder. The façade was grimy enough to pass for abandoned, but if you knew what to look for, the truth shimmered behind the grime, tiny ward glyphs etched in the corners of the windows, invisible to mundanes but glaringly obvious to me.

"Place has all the charm of a cursed wine cellar," Daisy muttered as we approached. We stopped in front of the reinforced door. A defensive ward hummed around it like a mosquito coil laced with magic.

"Think she left a welcome mat?" Daisy asked, already fingering a charm with too many sharp edges.

"If she did, it's probably rigged to hex our eyebrows off."

It took five minutes of focused disruption magic and two curses from Daisy before the lock gave a reluctant click.

Inside, it was worse than I remembered. The scent of burnt sage hung thick in the air, clashing with patchouli and something distinctly...pickled. The room was a chaotic blend of cluttered elegance and magical hoarding. Stacked spell-books with scorched covers teetered on shelves next to crystalline bowls of dried nightshade. A levitating tea kettle bumped gently against the ceiling like it had forgotten its purpose years ago.

"Yikes," Daisy whispered. "She was either a genius or an amateur with delusions of grandeur."

"Both."

She reached for a glowing orb sitting on a rune-etched pedestal.

"Don't—"

Too late. The orb sputtered, hissed, and belched out a burst of purple smoke that smelled like cinnamon and despair.

Daisy coughed, fanning the air. "Okay, okay! Lesson learned."

"Touch nothing shiny," I said, wiping my stinging eyes. "Basic studio etiquette."

"Is sarcasm a spell component in your world, or do you just have extra?"

Behind the illusion of disorder, we found the real work. A hidden drawer, layered with locking glyphs, revealed a trove of ward blueprints and client receipts, some legitimate, others clearly forged.

But what stopped me cold was a bundle of sigils tucked into a red leather folio.

"These aren't hers," I said, laying them out. "Look at the binding structure, this one uses Eastern layering, and that one's fae glyphwork. She couldn't pull either off without training."

Daisy leaned in, her face tightening. "Different magical signatures. I count at least four. And this one? This is Northern druidic. That's restricted work. Illegal in half the continent."

The realization hit me like a spell blast. "She was brokering for international clients. Forging signature patterns to mask their involvement. Selling black-market wards that looked like they came from legitimate casters—maybe even political ones."

"If this leaks," Daisy said, voice low, "every magical embassy from here to Edinburgh will lose their minds. This could trigger half a dozen diplomatic incidents. Maybe worse."

"Emma was sloppy, but this? This is warfare wrapped in velvet."

Daisy pulled a stack of mimic runes from the pile, each encoded to impersonate different magical flavors. One pulsed faintly in her palm. "This alone is worth a fortune. Or a death warrant."

We compared notes. Several of the enchantments bore mimic traces, faint echoes meant to impersonate someone else's magic. That made my stomach twist.

"She was setting people up," I realized. "Selling wards that framed other witches."

Daisy whistled. "She had enemies because she was making them. That could be motive for half the city." She opened the desk lining and pulled out a black envelope sealed with wax and blood thread. The moment she touched it, her eyes widened.

"What is it?" I asked.

Daisy held it just out of my reach. "Let's call it a lead for my employer."

My mouth tightened. "Care to share?"

"I will. If it helps us both." She tucked it into her jacket. "Trust, remember?"

I didn't, but I let it go. For now.

We were heading for the back exit when the air crackled, too clean, too sharp. Like lightning about to strike.

"Don't move," I hissed, grabbing Daisy's arm.

The air shimmered, and then the sigils appeared, glowing faintly in overlapping circles that spread across the wooden floor. A containment grid. Subtle. Intricate. Deadly. Not Emma's style. Too refined. Too official.

"Surveillance charm," I said. "Alliance-grade. This isn't street magic."

Daisy's eyes narrowed. "So we're standing in a magical mousetrap set by a government agency?"

"If it registers us, it'll record everything, face, aura, signature. Worse, it could flag us in their tracking system. We'd be monitored across the city. Anywhere we go, anything we touch."

Daisy swallowed hard. "Okay. Yeah. That would be bad."

"Worse than bad. That would be over. If the Alliance finds me here with evidence of signature forgeries, it's game over. I'll be disappeared into some holding cell where no one ever says my name again."

We both stood still, breathing shallow. Magic buzzed around us like a coiled wire.

"Can you get us out?" she asked.

I didn't answer. Not yet. I traced the edges of the nearest sigil with my eyes, memorizing the layering. High-tier surveillance mixed with reactive security wards. No pressure plates, but arcane resonance. Meaning one wrong pulse of magic would trigger it. I whispered a counter-ward, fingertips sketching faint glowing glyphs into the air. The grid flickered in response.

"One shot," I said. "When I say go, we bolt. Fast."

"Just another night out with you," Daisy muttered. "Nothing says bonding like almost getting caught by the magical secret police."

"Daisy," I warned.

"I know. Shut up and run. Ready."

"Go."

We burst through the barrier as the glyphs flared to life. Behind us, the charm detonated in a burst of light and sound, sharp enough to rattle the bricks, bright enough to blind anyone watching.

We didn't stop. Not until we were two alleys over, hearts racing, lungs burning.

Daisy bent forward, hands on her knees, panting. "You really know how to show a girl a good time."

I didn't laugh. "That ward wasn't just a trap. It was a warning."

She looked at me, the humor fading from her face.

"Someone's watching this place. And now they know we're watching them back."

Chapter Ten

The knock came just after dawn, quiet and deliberate, like a whisper meant to unsettle. It was the kind of sound that didn't wake you, it waited for you to notice it. The city outside my window still wore its coat of blue morning fog, the streets slick from an earlier rain. Light spilled in gray and gold across the floorboards as I approached the door, fingers brushing the edge of the hidden ward stitched into the frame.

I already knew who it was.

When I opened the door, the man standing there looked like he belonged to a black-and-white film that had never made it to color. His coat was tailored so precisely it may as well have been sewn onto his bones, and his skin had the smooth, luminous sheen of polished marble. Everything about him was sharp, cheekbones, posture, presence. An emissary of House Corvini, which meant I'd been officially noticed.

"Miss Sanz," he said with a bow just shallow enough to imply I didn't quite deserve it. "I bring a message from House Corvini."

"Of course you do," I muttered, leaning against the doorframe. "Nothing says good morning like thinly veiled threats from immortal aristocrats."

He didn't blink. "May I enter?"

"You're not invited."

His expression never faltered. "Then I shall be brief. My masters advise caution. The circles you've begun to tread are… volatile."

I crossed my arms. "That sounds like a threat."

He gave the barest shrug. "It is what it is. The House has become aware," he continued, "of your interest in certain names found among Emma Dench's clients."

My stomach tightened, a reflexive clench like something dark and ancient had just breathed across my skin. The hallway seemed colder, the light through the doorway too stark.

"What names?" I asked.

He didn't answer right away. Instead, he stepped to the side, just enough for the morning sun to gleam off the tiny silver clasp at his collar, a stylized eye within a fang-lined crescent. An insignia reserved for those entrusted with secrets.

His smile was polite. Too polite. "That would be telling. But suffice it to say Emma was involved in business she had no right to touch.

And some of her clients do not wish to be remembered."

I folded my arms tighter, trying to project a calm I didn't feel. "Let me guess. Those clients happen to have sharp teeth and expensive lawyers."

"Some have claws," he said, voice smooth as silk. "Some wield ink. And some? Some never leave fingerprints at all." He took a half-step forward, close enough for me to see the thin network of veins beneath his skin, the unnatural stillness in the way he held himself—as if motion was a choice, not a necessity.

"You've already stirred the waters, Miss Sanz. Ripples are inevitable. But if you continue, the waves will come. And when they do, they won't simply break against your door. They'll drown you."

His voice dropped, colder now. "If you push too hard, you won't just uncover secrets, you'll make enemies. Ancient ones. Ones the Alliance cannot protect you from."

"Then tell them to come talk to me directly," I snapped. "I don't scare easy."

He gave me a long, measured look. "But you do bargain. So let's not waste time pretending you wouldn't prefer another route."

I didn't answer. My silence was enough. He was right, I didn't want more enemies. I didn't want war. I wanted time, space, the chance to solve this before it unraveled me completely. He reached into his coat and pulled out a small velvet pouch, laying it carefully on my doorstep as if placing an offering before an altar.

"Twenty-four hours of quiet," he said. "In exchange, you hold your questions. No interviews, no scrying, no digging."

"And after that?" I asked, my voice low.

"Perhaps an introduction. If you're still breathing." He said it so casually, like it didn't matter either way. Maybe it didn't. To him, I was a variable, interesting, possibly useful, but ultimately replaceable.

I stared at the pouch. Vampires never gave something for nothing. There was always a ledger, always a line of fine print written in blood. But twenty-four hours could mean everything. It could be enough to warn Daisy, to stash the worst of what we'd found, to figure out if the Alliance was already moving in. Or if someone else was. I picked up the pouch. It was heavier than it looked, pulsing faintly with a protective ward, one I didn't dare open just yet.

"Deal," I said finally. "But if they come after me anyway?"

The emissary's eyes glinted like ice catching fire. "Then I will consider your debt paid in full."

He turned and walked away, steps so quiet they barely existed, disappearing into the thinning morning fog.

I closed the door and pressed my back to it, breath caught somewhere between defiance and dread. I didn't trust vampires. I

didn’t trust their offers, their warnings, or their idea of balance. But I trusted consequences. And if this was the cost of surviving long enough to finish what I’d started, then I’d pay it. Carefully.

Chapter Eleven

Gràcia looked different when you were hunting secrets. By day, it was bright tiles and winding alleys, kids chasing fútbols through plazas, vendors yelling over the scent of grilled sardines and hot oil. But under that charm was the other Gràcia, the one with rusted rooftops and basement clubs where deals were struck with blood and fangs.

We weren't there for tapas. Daisy had caught a thread from one of Emma's logs, an encoded record of deliveries tied to a name we both recognized: a fixer in this district with a reputation for laundering magical goods through shifter gangs. If Emma had moved stolen wards, and we were starting to believe she had, this was the next link in the chain.

More than that, this fixer had ties to mimic rune distributors, the kind that could craft a magical signature to look like someone else's. If Emma was selling wards that pointed back to other witches, maybe even me, we needed to find the source. I wore neutral layers and a glamour that softened the lines of my face. Just enough to make people glance past. Beside me, Daisy looked like she belonged, hood up, boots worn, a glint in her eye that said trouble had already tried her and lost.

The shifter gang we were visiting ran out of a garage tucked behind a graffiti-tagged market. The kind of place where the scent of motor oil masked the tang of fur and sweat and something older. We passed two lookouts, one lounging on a moped, the other pretending to fix a bike chain. Both gave us the same narrowed glance.

Inside the garage, the noise dimmed, replaced by the heavy hum of a baseline that thrummed low and steady, like a heartbeat trying too hard not to race. The walls were smeared with grease and sigils both, half-legible runes scrawled in soot and old blood. Benito leaned against a vintage car shell with one arm draped casually over the roof. His eyes were all predator: gold, unblinking, and waiting. Around him, half a dozen shifters lounged in poses meant to look relaxed but weren't. Someone was sharpening a knife far too slowly. Another cracked his knuckles in a rhythm that sounded almost like a countdown.

"Well, well," Benito said, voice smooth but sharp at the edges. "If it isn't the ward witch and her chaotic shadow."

Daisy offered a lazy wave. "Missed you too, Benito."

I didn't smile. Every nerve in my body was on edge. You would

think Benito and I went back years, but it was only a few months, back to a smuggling job gone wrong in the docks. We'd survived a vampire sting by sheer luck and quick magic. Ever since, there had been a strange sort of respect between us. Not friendship, not trust, but something taut and unspoken. We weren't allies, but we weren't enemies either.

"I'm not here to reopen old wounds," I said. "I'm looking for something Emma sold."

He raised an eyebrow. "Is that why you killed her? Lots of things passed through her hands. Why should we care?"

"I didn't kill her. Because one of them might've been mine."

A sound cut through the tension, a scuff of boots against concrete. I turned, and there he was. The young werewolf. Mrs. Gilmore's nephew. Kyle His eyes burned with the same fury as the day I froze him mid-lunge. His lip curled. "You've got some nerve showing your face here."

Daisy moved slightly closer to me, not protective, just ready. My left hand settled over my slingshot on my belt, ready to defend myself. I put my right hand in my pocket and felt for the right wardstone. My fingers closed around it and I waited to see how this would play out.

"She humiliated me," Kyle snapped. "In front of my aunt."

Benito didn't stop him. That was the warning.

"Better humiliated than in traction," I said coolly. "You attacked me. I defended myself. You got off easy."

His jaw clenched. I could see the ripple beneath his skin, the fight to keep the shift down.

"She murdered Emma," he growled, louder now. "And now we know the reason."

My voice went ice-cold. "If I had a reason, you wouldn't be breathing to mention it."

That got his attention and everyone else's. Silence rippled through the space. Benito didn't move, but his posture shifted ever so slightly, like a thread pulled taut.

"She's not here for revenge," Benito said eventually. "She's here for information. And as long as she's not lying, she's a guest."

Kyle understood the implicit order Benito had just given. He couldn't attack me now. Not unless he wanted to be challenged by Benito. I could see the frustration in his eyes. He spit on the ground and stalked away.

I didn't exhale until he was gone.

Benito turned back to me, expression unreadable. There was a flicker of something in his gaze, wary admiration, maybe. Or quiet calculation. "You make a habit of pissing off young wolves?"

"Only those that try to attack me," I said.

Benito exchanged a look with a wiry fox-shifter leaning by the fridge. Then he gestured to a shelf stacked with magical odds and ends, charms, stones, even some crude wards pressed between acrylic sheets. The lighting was dim, casting warped shadows across the clutter. Dust hung in the air like residue from old magic. And there it was.Tucked behind a cracked mirror and a box of incense, one of my designs. Not a copy. Mine. The sigils etched with blood ink. The anchoring glyph half-hidden beneath the protective overlay. I'd crafted it three years ago during a job that had gone off the rails in Valencia. The artifact was supposed to be destroyed in the fallout, but clearly, someone had salvaged it. My fingers hovered near the edge of the shelf, not touching. A flood of memory came sharp and fast, the dark ritual chamber, the sound of chanting that scraped across my skin like sandpaper, the smell of burning salt. I'd made that ward under orders. Not for protection. For control. Back when I was still one of them.

The memory crashed over me, uninvited. The hunter cult didn't call themselves that, of course. They had gentler names, The Circle, The Silent Order, The Hands of Balance. But under the runes and robes was something colder. Crueler. They taught discipline by pain. Focus through deprivation. Ritual magic carved into the body as well as the soul. I still had the scar behind my left ear, shaped like a spiral, a branding rune. My first successful binding. They trained us to make wards that could choke, sear, silence. I had been one of the best. Fast. Clever. Obedient. Until I ran.

I stepped forward slowly, pulse pounding. "Where did you get this?"

Benito didn't blink. "Came through trade. Emma delivered it last spring. Said it was untraceable."

Untraceable. A lie Emma had clearly told more than once. And one that might've gotten her killed.

I felt sick. If Emma had been moving stolen magical constructs, she'd had access to archives, maybe more than mine. Maybe dozens. Someone was building a collection of forgotten, dangerous magic. And now I knew where at least one piece had landed.

"We need to talk," I said. "Now."

Benito raised a brow. "What's it worth to you?"

I met his gaze. "What's your crew worth to you?"

The tension snapped taut. Even the air felt sharp with the weight of unspoken consequences.

The game had changed, and they all knew it.

Benito didn't flinch. He stepped closer, arms loose at his sides, voice low but calm. "You've got thirty seconds to convince me this isn't a shake-down. My people don't respond well to threats."

“I’m not threatening,” I said. “I’m warning. That artifact on your shelf? It wasn’t just lost. It was stolen. Someone, maybe Emma, maybe the people she worked for, has been lifting dangerous magic out of dead zones and vaults. Selling it under fake sigils. One of them killed her. And if they think you know anything, they’ll come for you too.”

His jaw tightened. “You don’t know that.”

“I know they’ve already set me up,” I said. “I know the Alliance has eyes on this city. And I know a mimic rune when I see one. That ward bears *my* signature. If they trace it here, they won’t knock. They’ll burn your place to ash.”

A muscle jumped in his jaw. He looked over at the fox-shifter, then back at me.

“You want what?” he asked.

“Names,” I said. “Contacts Emma used. Anyone she sent to you, anyone she met here. I need her paper trail, whatever you have.”

He considered it, gaze unreadable. “And what do I get?”

“Advanced warding for your perimeter,” I said. “Three layers. Heat- and blood-sensing, mimic-resistant. You’ve been needing upgrades.”

Daisy whistled under her breath. “That’s worth a fortune.”

Benito didn’t look away from me. “You do the work first.”

“Half now,” I said. “Half when I get the intel.”

He stared at me a beat longer, then nodded once. “Deal. But if you double-cross me…”

“I won’t,” I said. “Because if I’m right about what’s coming, you’re going to need more than luck to keep your crew breathing.”

Benito turned toward the back room. “Fox,” he barked. “Get the box.”

We waited in silence as the wiry shifter returned with a metal case and handed it to Benito. He opened it just enough for me to see the edge of parchment, the scent of old ink and something darker wafting out.

“Start with these,” he said. “Then we’ll see how much more you need.”

I reached for the case.

A while later, Daisy and I stepped into the alley behind the garage, air sharp with cold grease and the scent of old exhaust. Daisy lit a cigarette with a flick of magic, then looked at me. “You froze up back there. Not like you.”

I leaned against the wall, breathing steady. “That ward on the shelf? I made it for the Order.”

Daisy didn’t speak right away. “Thought you didn’t talk about that.”

“I don’t. I can’t. Not all of it.”

She waited.

“They trained me to build prisons,” I said. “Traps for people. For creatures. Magic designed to punish. That ward? It wasn’t made to protect anything. It was made to strip a vampire of free will. Keep him docile. Compliant.”

Daisy let out a low whistle. “And you made it?”

“I had to.” I paused. “I thought it was gone. I made sure it was gone.”

Her gaze softened, not with pity, just understanding. “Then we’re in deeper than I thought.”

“Yeah,” I said. “And if someone’s rebuilding what I destroyed, I’m not just a suspect anymore.”

I looked at her, my voice raw. “I’m a warning.”

Daisy flicked ash off her cigarette and studied me for a long moment. Then, in that way she had of making the impossible feel casual, she said, “You know, for someone carrying that kind of weight, you walk like you still believe the ground owes you something.”

I blinked. “Is that a compliment?”

“It’s survival,” she said. “And maybe a little impressive.”

I tried to laugh, but it came out dry. “You’re not afraid?”

“Of you? No. Of what’s coming? Yeah.” She leaned her shoulder against the wall beside mine. “But I’ve seen enough monsters to know the ones that walk away from the fire usually know how to light it again when they need to.”

I looked at her sideways. “So that’s it? You’re just… sticking around?”

“Don’t flatter yourself. I want answers, and you’re the flaming breadcrumb trail.”

I almost smiled. Almost.

But then Daisy’s tone dropped, just a notch.

“We stop them,” she said. “Whoever’s pulling the strings, rebuilding what you escaped—we stop them. Because if they’re willing to use magic like that again, they’re not just a threat to you.”

“They’re a threat to everyone,” I finished.

Daisy flicked the last of her cigarette into the gutter. “Exactly.”

Chapter Twelve

We didn't make it two blocks from the garage.

The street was narrow, dimly lit, lined with shuttered cafés and flower boxes that had long since dried to husks. We were mid-step across an empty crosswalk when I felt it—the shift in the air, subtle as a breath caught mid-sentence. Something slick and wrong slid beneath the surface of the world.

"Stop," I said instinctively, but too late. A shimmer rippled across the cobblestones. The world snapped into focus with a sickening twist, and a ripple of power surged up through the soles of my boots. My wards screamed, reactive magic flaring hot against my skin.

Daisy crouched low, knife in one hand, eyes scanning wildly. "What the hell was that?"

"We're caught," I said, breath tight. My gaze dropped to the glowing threads weaving through the stone. "It's one of mine."

She blinked at me. "You built this?"

"Years ago. Someone's reusing my old patterns."

The sigils flared up from the pavement like firelight, spirals, thorns, and binding hooks etched in flickering red-gold. I recognized the sequence instantly. Not just the style. The intent. My own work, corrupted. This version wasn't just a trap, it was a siphon. Designed to drain power, disable escape, and record the process.

It wrapped around my spine like cold wire, feeding panic into the base of my skull. A phantom leash, alive and tightening.

Daisy grit her teeth, struggling against the creeping restraint. "Can't you disable it?"

"I can't unbuild it, whoever laid this version rigged the collapse layer."

"Which means?"

"If I try to reverse it, it'll set off a cascade failure and fry us both."

She paled. "So we're really screwed?"

"No," I said, drawing a breath. "I just have to break it before it finishes syncing."

I dropped my glamour, magic flaring free. The air snapped. Threads of heat and wardlight danced along my skin like electric veins. I reached deep inside myself and pulled. With a whispered command, I cracked the anchoring glyph. Magic roared out of me in a shockwave, shattering the ward-lines. The ground lit up in jagged arcs, stone blistering under the discharge. The trap screamed back,

desperate to contain me, but I'd already pushed past it. The pressure snapped like a bone splitting under weight. Then, silence. Daisy stumbled upright beside me, blinking against the haze of magic that still sparked in the air.

"That was..." she shook her head, at a rare loss for words. "That was terrifying. And kind of beautiful."

I glanced at her, chest still heaving. "You okay?"

"Me? You just cracked the pavement open and made the street glow like a holy symbol on fire. I'm *fine*. Are *you* okay?"

I gave her a tight nod. "It'll pass. Just a little magical backlash."

She didn't speak right away. Just stared at me, like she was seeing me in a new light. "You held it all in until the last second, didn't you? You had that trap dissected while I was still trying to figure out which way was up."

"I built it," I said. "I knew how much pain it could cause. I knew how fast it would collapse. I didn't have the luxury of guessing."

Daisy let out a low, appreciative whistle. "I knew you were good. But *damn*. That was next-level. You didn't just break the trap, you unmade it. Like it never had a right to exist."

I didn't reply. There wasn't pride in me, only necessity. But Daisy's words settled something in my chest. A thread of belief, not just in what I could do, but in what I had chosen not to be. We stumbled out of the center of the blast, my chest heaving, smoke curling from my fingers. The scent of scorched stone clung to the air, tinged with ozone and burning sigils.

Daisy's boots scraped the curb. "Holy shit," she said. "That wasn't spellwork. That was demolition."

I couldn't answer yet. The backlash still throbbed in my chest. The spell had cost me more than I wanted to admit. That's when I felt it, eyes on us. A subtle shift in shadow, movement too still to be natural. I looked up. A figure stood poised on a rooftop across the street. Silhouetted against the sky, coat fluttering. Pale skin. Eyes like twin coals burning low. Vampire. And in his hand, a crystal lens. Focused. Steady. Recording. He was filming.

"Daisy," I said, voice hoarse. "We're compromised."

She followed my gaze, hissed under her breath. "You've got to be kidding me."

The trap hadn't just been a trap. It had been a trigger. A setup.

"They wanted to see what you'd do," Daisy said, voice cold. "And now they've got it. On tape."

The vampire vanished in a blink, faster than thought.

My hands curled into fists. "Someone wanted me on record," I said. "Someone wanted proof of what I'm capable of."

Daisy stepped beside me, gaze hard. "And now the whole damn

supernatural underworld's going to start asking what side you're on."

I didn't answer right away. My pulse was still erratic, the crackle of magic fading from my limbs like thunder retreating into the distance. "They want me visible," I said at last. "They want power on display—not because they're afraid of it. Because they're shopping for it."

Daisy frowned. "Shopping?"

"House Corvini offered me a deal. Soul-binding ward. They want me to make one."

Her face went cold. "You said no?"

"Of course I said no."

Daisy stared at the rooftop where the vampire had vanished. "And now this? They set you up to show exactly what you could do if they owned you."

"They don't want a partner," I said. "They want a weapon. One with a name, a legend, and no leash scars visible."

Daisy crossed her arms. "So what, they're sending film reels around the vamp aristocracy like a recruitment pitch?"

"Probably already happening." I glanced back at the cracked cobblestones, smoke still curling upward like warning breath.

"They think if they press me hard enough, I'll crack. Or bend."

"Will you?" Daisy asked, quiet.

"No," I said. "But they're betting I'll get desperate. And desperate people make deals they regret."

Daisy nodded slowly. "Then we stay ahead of them. We find out who's pushing this. And we end it before they think you're up for sale."

I turned to her, the ache still in my chest from the backlash, from the truth I'd spoken aloud. "Why *are* you helping me, Daisy?"

She didn't answer immediately. Just shoved her hands in her coat pockets and watched the street like she was counting ghosts.

"I told you," she said finally. "You're the flaming breadcrumb trail."

I gave her a look.

She rolled her eyes. "Okay, fine. You're also the only one who doesn't lie about how screwed we all are. That matters more than people realize."

I raised an eyebrow. "That all?"

Daisy hesitated, then glanced at me sidelong. "You survived them. The Order. The worst of it. And you still walk around choosing not to become them. That makes you dangerous in a way people don't expect."

Her voice softened, just enough to cut deeper. "I've seen a lot of people who were broken. You? You broke the cage instead. I respect that."

That quiet filled the space between us again, heavy and honest.

“Thanks,” I said eventually.

She smirked. “Don’t get mushy on me, Sanz. We’ve still got a conspiracy to unspool and some vampires to piss off.”

Chapter Thirteen

We slipped back to the safehouse under cover of an early fog. My fingers still tingled with residual magic, and every ward I passed buzzed like it was aware of what I'd done. I hadn't slept. Didn't want to. Couldn't. Safe, for now. Daisy dumped the case onto the low table and began sifting through the contents like a woman starving for answers.

"This ledger," she muttered, flipping through aged parchment and charm-sealed pages. "She logged everything. Names, wards, trades, the works. It's... organized. Too organized."

I stepped in behind her and peered over her shoulder. The handwriting was Emma's, flourished and laced with vanity. Every page was part confession, part insurance policy.

"She always liked to show off," I said. "Even in ink."

But as the names piled up, unease took root in my gut. I thought I wanted answers. But each line in that ledger felt like another ghost crawling up my back. Page after page of clients, and suddenly, there they were, a vampiric noble crest inked in blood, a shifter family sigil pressed in sealing wax, and beneath them, coded references I could decrypt in seconds.

"She was working with people too powerful to say no to, and too arrogant to hide well."

Daisy pointed to a string of notes beside one ward transaction. "This is tied to House Corvini. Here, this delivery had a mimic rune embedded. And this one... shit. A rogue coven out of Salamanca. Didn't they get blacklisted last year?"

"Blacklisted and quietly absolved. Politics."

The farther we read, the darker the connections became. Wards that shouldn't exist. Blood pacts, mental dampeners, compulsion layers, all custom work. All paid in favors and protection. It wasn't just reckless. It was deliberate. I leaned against the counter, nausea twisting my gut. Every name we uncovered was a potential suspect. Every transaction a motive. "I thought finding her killer would narrow things down," I said. "But this... it's everyone. Everyone had a reason to silence her."

Daisy didn't argue. Her silence said it all. She dropped into the armchair, ledger still open on her lap. The wards on the walls buzzed faintly, like they sensed the magnitude of what we were holding.

"This isn't just bad business. This is blackmail leverage. She wasn't

just dealing magic. She was tracking where it went."

"She was building a map," I said numbly. "Of who's using what, and how to hurt them if they step out of line."

"And now *you* have it."

I shook my head slowly. "No. Now I'm *holding* it. But if word gets out, if people think I mean to use it?"

"They'll kill you," Daisy said bluntly.

I didn't flinch. I already knew. The truth sat heavy in my stomach. Emma hadn't been innocent, but she hadn't deserved to die like that. And whoever had killed her hadn't done it out of panic. They'd done it to send a message. Clean, professional, and intentional. All marks of people who mean business. And now the trail was pointing in too many directions. Vampires, wolves, witches, rogue agents. No wonder the Alliance had me in their crosshairs.

"I'll never find them," I whispered. "Not in this mess. Not when they're all guilty of something."

Daisy closed the ledger. Her hands were steady. "That's what they're counting on. That you'll feel too overwhelmed to dig. That you'll stop."

I looked up at her. "And you?"

Daisy smiled, but it didn't reach her eyes. "I don't do easy. And I *never* stop."

Before I could answer, something slipped out from between the pages of the ledger and fluttered to the floor. A photograph. I picked it up. It was old and creased. It was also stamped with a sigil I hadn't seen in years, the crescent-over-circle mark used by the Order to denote 'watch subjects.' In the photo, Emma was standing beside someone I didn't recognize. Male. Shaved head. Broad shoulders. And behind them, barely visible, was the interior of a ritual chamber. The same kind used by the Order. My breath hitched. I reached for the back of the photo, flipping it over. A line of coordinates. And a date.

Daisy leaned in. "That's a clue, isn't it?"

I nodded slowly. "It's worse. It's a connection I didn't know existed."

She narrowed her eyes. "To who?"

"To me," I said. "And maybe to why Emma died."

I turned the photo over again, staring at the coordinates like they might rearrange themselves into something safer. But they didn't. They pointed to a location deep in the Montseny mountains, isolated, protected by ancient wards, and completely off-grid. The kind of place the Order used when they didn't want to be found.

Daisy paced a tight loop behind me, her boots silent against the rug. "If Emma was meeting someone there, she wasn't just connected to the Order. She was being watched by them. Maybe used."

“Or maybe she was part of something worse,” I said. “If she turned, if she sold them out, or if she was helping someone *inside*…”

The thought made me sick.

Daisy stopped pacing. “We need to check that site. Soon. Before whoever left that photo realizes you’ve got it.”

I tucked the image back into the ledger, careful not to let it bend. My fingers trembled slightly, just for a moment. “Then we go,” I said. “Tomorrow. At first light.”

Chapter Fourteen

The forest in Montseny didn't welcome us. It watched. Trees leaned too close together, their limbs knitted overhead like old bones. The deeper we went, the quieter the world became, no birdsong, no wind, just the crunch of our boots and the soft hum of my detection charm. The silence pressed in from all sides, heavy and unnatural, like a held breath that had lasted too long.

Daisy muttered, "Feels like the woods want us gone."

"They probably do." I pointed at a faint shimmer along the tree line, just a ripple, like heat on asphalt. "There's a ward boundary. Masking charm. Old."

"Order work?" she asked.

I nodded. "Deep layering. Someone went to a lot of trouble to keep this place forgotten."

Crossing the boundary was like wading into cold fog. The magic clung to my skin, viscous and metallic. It tasted like rust and memory, the flavor of things buried alive.

Daisy shivered beside me. "This feels like a graveyard."

"It is."

We followed the coordinates carved on the back of the photo up a twisted slope until the forest parted into a clearing, unnaturally round, the kind made by fire or ritual. A half-collapsed chapel hunched at its center, moss-covered and gutted by time. Tree roots clawed through the stone foundation. Black scorch marks spidered across the clearing's edge, mostly hidden by encroaching greenery.

"Something happened here," Daisy said, voice low. "Something ugly."

"It's Order-built," I said, crouching beside a chipped stone step etched with half-faded sigils. "Ritual site. Hollow Ground."

"Hollow?" Daisy repeated.

"Places warded to erase magical residue. Hide intent. Bury memories. You work a spell here, and the land forgets it ever happened."

She exhaled sharply, gaze sweeping the clearing. "Perfect place for murder."

The stone doorway groaned as we forced it open. The air inside hit us like a wall, damp, stale, thick with a kind of silence that didn't belong in the natural world. My wards fluttered along my skin, uneasy. The chamber was narrow, circular. Half shrine, half cage. Its

walls sloped inward slightly, giving the impression of being pressed in from all sides. The space was built to suppress and isolate. Runes scorched the walls in concentric circles, defensive, binding, and sacrificial. The sigils closest to the floor were old and cracked. The ones higher up? Newer. Fresh enough to bleed. Burned ash coated the floor like soot, disturbed only by what looked like a single set of footprints. Someone had been here. Someone who knew where to step.

Daisy knelt by a broken wardline, brushing her fingers over a jagged etching. “Someone disrupted this. Recently. Look at the cuts, those weren’t made with time. Someone didn’t want this spell to finish.”

“Or wanted to erase it before anyone found it.” I crouched beside her, brushing away a pile of loose dust. My hand struck something hard, metallic.

I brushed aside dirt and uncovered a mimic runes, shattered. Its crystal core cracked down the middle, the etching still faintly glowing. “Whoever cast this was trying to impersonate someone else.”

“Who?” Daisy asked.

“I don’t know yet. But this kind of mimicry? It’s not street-level. This was done by someone with training. The kind the Order used to teach.”

She went quiet.

Tucked into the crumbling altar was a scrap of parchment, protected by a preservation charm still barely active. I reached out for it and pulled it out gently. A journal page. Not Emma’s handwriting. Blockier. Male. I read the text, *She’s not ready yet. But the shell is holding. If we can get her to the Valencia node, extraction is viable.* I stared at the page, bile rising. “Extraction,” I whispered. “Like a memory pull. Or worse—identity theft magic.”

Daisy looked up, her brow furrowed. “Someone was trying to *replace* her?”

“No. They were trying to use her. Hollow her out. Use her face, her name, maybe even her power.”

Daisy stood slowly, her expression darkening. “What kind of magic even allows that?”

“The kind that breaks something in you first,” I said.

Near the far wall, I found a cracked mirror shard half-buried in old ash. On its edge, etched in old blood, a name had been partially scrubbed out—except for the last few letters.

Familiar. Too familiar.

My real name.

Daisy’s hand closed on my shoulder, grounding me. “Sanz.”

I couldn’t look away from it. “I know.”

A breeze stirred. No, something else. A flicker of power, like an old spell waking. The air in the chamber shifted. A glowing shimmer began to form in the center, pulsing softly at first, then sharpening into the outline of a woman. Emma. Not truly her, an echo. A memory frozen in time. She flickered, her image breaking at the edges. Her voice fractured as it played: "He's coming…I didn't know…it wasn't my choice…he said you'd…" The light flared. A warning pulse in the runes surrounding the memory.

"Wait," I said, stepping forward.

But it was too late.

A sharp crack rang out. The echo shattered into a thousand motes of light and smoke as an erasure ward triggered.

"Damn it!" Daisy shouted. "They didn't just kill her. They *erased* her. Like she was a loose thread."

I stood frozen, the words echoing in the now-empty room.

"They taught me how to build spells like that. But this? This was done by someone high up. Someone trained like I was."

Daisy looked over at me, her expression unreadable. "You think it's someone from your past?"

"I don't think," I said. "I *know*."

I stepped forward and touched the edge of the final rune on the floor. It burned hot, too hot. Pain lanced up my arm like fire.

Magic backlash slammed into me, cold, electric pain arcing through my spine. My body hit the wall with a jarring thud. The echo of the trap was keyed to my blood. A final safeguard. It was both a message and a curse. They knew I'd come here. My breath came in gasps. Every cell in my body screamed.

Daisy caught me before I slid to the floor. "Sanz!"

I blinked through the pain, my vision swimming.

"Who the hell would do this?" she demanded.

I looked past her to the broken rune. To the clawed mirror. To the place where Emma's voice had once lived.

"Someone who wants to finish what they started," I said. "And they're not done."

Chapter Fifteen

The tunnels beneath Montjuïc weren't on any map. They ran like forgotten veins beneath the fortress hill, twisting through old resistance bunkers, smugglers' hideouts, and execution vaults leftover from the civil war. The stones remembered every scream. Every secret. And now, they whispered again. The entrance was a rusted hatch tucked behind the shell of a decommissioned tram station. Moss clung to the cracked tile walls, and an old mural of Sant Jordi peeling above us looked like he'd lost his last dragon. Daisy keyed the hatch open with a glyph she'd bought off a half-Fae pickpocket in El Born. It creaked like a coffin lid. The scent hit me first. It was a blend of ozone, burning herbs, and something older, like incense left too long in a sealed church.

"Smells like desperation and overpriced potions," Daisy muttered.

We descended into an underground Barcelona most locals never knew existed, a place where the Gothic Quarter's shadow stretched deeper than sunlight ever reached. The black market pulsed with low magic and illicit ambition. Lanterns floated along vaulted ceilings, their flames blue with alchemical fire. Wards shimmered in Catalan script across canvas tents and crumbling stone. Vendors whispered spells under their breath while offering enchanted jamón, bottled memory draughts, and relics dug from beneath Roman ruins. We passed a booth selling cursed lottery tickets and another peddling vials of bottled flamenco, real flamenco, the kind that stirred blood and ghosts.

This was reconnaissance. We were here for a name, a magical forger who dealt in mimic sigils, identity veils, and ritual cloaks. Someone who might've built the mimic rune we'd found at Montseny. Someone who might know how Emma died, and who wanted me erased next. His booth looked like a drunk artificer's fever dream. Scrolls stacked in teetering towers, some fluttering with self-editing ink. Crystals chirped to themselves in cracked bowls that hissed every time someone got too close. A floating fan made of smoke oscillated lazily overhead, failing to cool the stale, alchemically charged air. The forger himself was thin, angular, and wore an apron scorched in half a dozen places. He hunched over a desk littered with failed enchantments and glowing rune fragments, his monocle blinking independently of his eye, an enchanted lens clearly possessed by something with opinions.

“You’re not clients,” he said without looking up. His voice sounded like paper tearing. “You’re trouble.”

Daisy leaned in, resting one elbow on his cluttered counter. “Trouble pays better.”

He finally looked at us. His gaze skipped right over Daisy and landed on me. Or more specifically, on the shard I held up between two fingers.

His expression shifted, interest curdling into unease. “Where did you get that?”

“Montseny,” I said. “Someone used this mimic rune to trap a ritual site.”

He snatched it from my hand with bony fingers, spun away, and began muttering to himself in three different languages. “Mine…no. Based on mine. Modified. Brutal work. Blood-coded. Amplified anchor layers…imbecile! You’re lucky you’re not ash.”

He plucked a heat-warped tome from one shelf, then rummaged beneath his table for a design ledger and a vial of black ink so thick it moved like sap. “I didn’t make this,” he said at last. “But I know who did. She came through six months ago. Paid in changeling glass and smug silences. Thought she was clever. She was desperate, like most who frequent my stall.”

“Who?” I asked, sharp.

He hesitated. His hands slowed. His monocle blinked once nervously. And then the crowd behind us shifted. A voice cut through the air, soft and close, brushing the back of my neck like a curse.

“Hello again… *Aziza.*”

My heart sank. The name I hadn’t heard since I fled the Order. The name buried in wards, erased from record, burned from my memory with salt, ash, and spell-fire. Hearing it now was like being stabbed with a blade carved from the past. I spun, hands already raised, my slingshot loaded and ready to fire at the enemy.

I froze.

There was no one there. No figure. No face. Just a ripple in the air, gone as soon as it appeared.

Panic exploded through me, hot and wild. Every sigil I’d ever laid to hide myself screamed. My defenses recoiled like a breached dam. My wards sparked, shivering in a web across my skin, searching for the source.

Daisy grabbed my arm, grounding me. “Val—what’s wrong?”

“They said my name,” I whispered. “My *real* name.”

The forger dropped the vial. It shattered with a sharp crack, spilling black ink like blood across his notes. The market had gone quiet. People turned just enough to pretend not to stare, while some sidled toward exits as if they could smell trouble building like a storm.

Daisy's eyes scanned the crowd, her fingers twitching at her side. Then her gaze locked onto a shimmer near a support pillar, an illusion charm distorting the space like heat haze.

"There," she breathed. "That shimmer. They're cloaked."

Before I could respond, the shimmer darted. They were quick and precise. Trained in evasion maneuvers the same way I was.

"Go," she snapped. "Now."

We ran. The market blurred around us, vibrant stalls becoming streaks of color and threat. Magic prickled in the air, chasing behind us like a rising tide. A hex flared near my shoulder and fizzled as my defensive charm caught it just in time. We hit the tunnel with burning lungs and pounding hearts. Because someone in the black market hadn't just seen through me. They'd spoken the name I'd tried to bury. And that meant they weren't just watching. They were hunting.

We didn't stop running until the market tunnels gave way to the crumbling old metro lines beyond the southern edge of Poble-sec. We ducked into a disused switching station, sealed with wards so old they'd started to fossilize. The moment we crossed the threshold, I dropped the veil on my magic and collapsed against the wall. Daisy sealed the entrance behind us with three rapid-fire sigils and turned toward me. "You okay?"

My heart still hadn't settled. My magic buzzed against my skin, like angry hornets.

"They knew my name, Daisy. Not a cover, not a nickname. *My name.*"

She crouched beside me, breath still short. "Yeah. I heard. And I saw your face. That wasn't shock, that was *trauma.*"

I nodded, too numb to speak at first. The pain was deep. "I thought I burned it out of the world. That I severed everything tied to the old me. The worst part wasn't the name. It was that I still answered to it."

Daisy leaned back against a rusted breaker panel. "You think the forger sold you out?"

I shook my head. "No. He was too scared. Whoever whispered it, they were already watching. And they wanted me to know it. Wanted to unnerve me. We need to figure out who that mimic rune copy really came from."

I traced a ward in the air to reinforce the seals around us. Just in case. Because tonight proved something I'd tried hard not to believe: Someone didn't just want me dead. They wanted *Aziza* erased. And that meant the only way forward, was to stop running. The silence that followed felt brittle. We sat in the dim, sigil-lit dark of the old switching station, neither of us saying much. Daisy was cleaning the edge of a ward knife. I was sketching rune fragments onto the dusty concrete with the tip of my boot, trying to quiet the noise in my head.

The silence stretched between us, thick with old ghosts and new fear.

"You've been hiding more than a name," she finally said.

I didn't look up. "What do you want to know?"

"I want to know how deep this goes," she said, voice low but even. "I want to know if the person I've been trusting is still the one sitting in front of me."

That stung, because I couldn't blame her. I'd revealed a lot over our short time together and it wasn't fair to expect someone to understand my history and why I allowed myself to be used as a tool for so long. I had many regrets and a lot of things to atone for in my past.

"I was trained to lie," I said. "To disappear. That name, it belonged to someone I had to bury to survive."

Daisy stared at me for a long moment, then looked away. "That name belonged to someone powerful enough to scare people in the black market into silence."

I let that sit between us. My spark of my temper flared. I said, "You act like I'm the only one hiding something."

She tensed. "Excuse me?"

"You've got secrets too, Daisy. The kind of magic you use? The way you saw through that cloak shimmer in seconds? That's not street training."

Her mouth pressed into a thin line. "We all have ghosts. You don't get to hold mine against me when yours are practically clawing through the walls."

"Then don't pretend this is one-sided," I said. "We both agreed this wasn't about trust. It's survival."

She looked away, jaw tight. "This is still a temporary partnership."

"Exactly," I said. "Because of your mysterious benefactor. That's the only reason you're still here. So let's stop pretending either of us is clean."

We sat in silence again, but it wasn't empty. It made my skin itch. When I finally met her eyes, I said, "I didn't want to drag you into this."

"You didn't. I stepped in. But now I need the truth, Sanz. Not just the pieces you think I can handle." She leaned against the wall and waited for me to talk.

I wondered how much to reveal. I'd already share more than I had with most. We weren't alone for long. A whisper of cold brushed the air, followed by the scent of rot. The vampire emissary stepped into the warded space as if the sigils parted for him. Maybe they had. Daisy stood first, one hand hovering near her dagger. I rose slower, my pulse already spiking. My slingshot was out, aimed at the emissary. His eyes tracked my hands. He didn't bother with

pleasantries.

"The House grows impatient," he said. "They were promised progress."

"I told you," I said, rising to my feet, "the soul-binding ward you're asking for isn't a trinket. It's a sentence."

His eyes flicked to the reinforced seals behind us. "And yet, you've been busy."

Daisy stepped forward, shoulders squared. "She's not your tool."

The emissary turned toward her, and for the first time, actually looked. A slow, deliberate tilt of his head. "And yet she builds. In secret."

Daisy narrowed her eyes. "You think pressure makes people perform?"

He gave a faint, predatory smile. "I think pressure reveals them."

I stepped between them. "Enough. Tell your House they'll get something. But I decide when."

He studied me, no, assessed me. "There will be a demonstration. In three nights. The House expects you to bring the prototype or the plans. You're expected alone."

"And if I don't?"

His smile never reached his eyes. "Then others will come. And they won't knock."

He didn't wait for an answer. He vanished in a blink of shadow and cold.

The moment he was gone, I turned to Daisy, my breath tight. "You shouldn't have stepped in."

"I'm not going to stand there while they try to collar you," she snapped.

"I've dealt with vampires longer than you've been drawing wards."

"Maybe so," she said, voice taut, "but you're not thinking clearly. They're playing you, and you're letting them."

We stood in silence, the cold of his presence lingering like a threat neither of us wanted to acknowledge. Neither of us stepped away. After the vampire vanished, Daisy paced the length of the chamber like a storm bottled in a too-small space. Her boots scraped softly against the concrete, but her silence was louder than any shouting.

"You're going to do it, aren't you?" she said finally, stopping mid-step.

I didn't respond.

"That's why he said you've been busy. Because you have. You've already started."

"I'm protecting myself," I said, keeping my voice even.

"You're building a soul-binding ward, Sanz. I want to know when. I've barely left your side in all this time. You couldn't have sourced

the ingredients, which means you've had them all along."

"I'm building a *trap*. For whoever is trying to erase me. The vampires think it's for them, but I'm not handing it over." I didn't tell her she was right. I'd always had the ingredients hoping against hope that I would never have to use them, but I always kept them hidden, just in case.

Daisy scoffed, but it sounded more pained than mocking. "You're playing with fire. Worse, you're playing their game. Do you even know if you can stop once you start?"

"Do you?" I snapped. "You've been keeping secrets too, Daisy. Half the time you're one step ahead of me, and the other half you're looking over your shoulder like someone's watching you too."

She turned on me, eyes blazing. "You want to do this now?"

"I'm not the only one hiding who I used to be," I said. "Maybe I don't get to demand honesty, but don't act like you're here out of charity."

Her jaw clenched. "I'm here because I thought you were worth saving."

The words cut deeper than I wanted them to.

"But maybe you're just someone who never stopped building cages, even after you escaped yours." She shook her head. She didn't wait for a response. Just turned, dropped into her bedroll, and faced the wall. I stood alone in the flickering glyph light, the weight of magic and memory pressing in on all sides.

I waited until Daisy fell into a restless doze before pulling the scrap of silver-etched parchment from my jacket. The prototype wasn't finished. But I'd started it. Not for the House. Not for the Alliance. For me. Because whoever was hunting me knew the shape of my magic, and I needed something new. Something they hadn't seen coming. By the glow of a floating glyph, I dipped my pen into a blend of dragonbone ash and copper. One line. Then another. A ward that could hold a secret even from itself. A weapon disguised as mercy. Something only Aziza could build.

I didn't sleep. I continued long into the night. Even after Daisy rolled over and the room went still, the air felt too tight, my skin too wired. I sat alone by the glyph light, watching shadows stretch against the walls. It reminded me of the ritual cells the Order used, dim, circular, with just enough light to write your own guilt down in runes. I pulled my knees to my chest. Tried to breathe. Every spell I ever crafted for the Order, every sigil I carved into someone else's pain, had been deliberate. And even after I ran, I hadn't stopped being good at it. I hadn't stopped building cages.That was the thing no one told you about escaping. You bring the tools with you. Maybe that's why I kept people away. Why I never let Daisy all the way in. Because the

more someone knows you, the easier it is to see the parts that never healed right. The ones you twisted yourself around just to survive. And maybe I deserved to be alone because that's the only place I couldn't hurt anyone else. The glyph light flickered, catching the shimmer of ink I'd left behind. The lines on the parchment curled like a question waiting to be answered.

Chapter Sixteen

The morning was tense but we pretended all was well as we made our way back to the city.

We found the body just after dawn. Word had spread through the underground circuit, someone had turned up dead in El Raval, and the magic surrounding the site reeked of something familiar. Too familiar. A contact of Daisy's, a banshee who kept tabs on violent deaths for fun and profit, sent a whisper spell to our safehouse. By the time we arrived, the crime scene had been unofficially cleared. No curious onlookers, no Alliance. Just blood, scorch marks, and silence.

It was the scent that struck me first, copper, burnt rosemary, and the sharp bite of broken ward magic. The kind that gets in your throat and stays there. The body was sprawled beneath a crumbling archway between a shuttered café and a graffiti-tagged hostel. Shadows pooled unnaturally around her.

Christina Cruz.

I knew her. Not well, but enough. She'd bought a defensive ward from me two years ago. A good one. I remembered her wide smile, her nervous questions, the way her hands trembled just slightly when I handed over the binding stone. And now she was another name on a growing list.

Daisy crouched beside the body, brushing a gloved hand through the dirt. She examined the pattern burned into the ground. "This isn't the same as Emma's."

"No," I said. "But it's a message."

The rune sequence had been altered, rough, ugly lines drawn to look like mine. Not a mimic rune this time. A forgery meant to point straight at me. Someone wanted her dead. But they also wanted me blamed. And now she was another name on a growing list.

"The blood was used to trace the ward structure," Daisy muttered, glancing over her notes. She crouched next to the scorched lines again, her brow furrowed. "It was keyed to Christina's own signature, but look at this here? That's *your* trigger glyph."

I knelt beside her, scanning the lines. They were messy but unmistakable. I'd used that particular glyph once, maybe twice, for time-release shielding. It was obscure, one I'd developed myself during a freelance job. Not the kind of thing that would pop up by accident.

"They're framing me again," I said, too tired for outrage. "But they're getting bolder."

Daisy didn't reply at first. Her hands moved carefully through the residue, lifting a small burned crystal shard. She held it up to the light, then let out a low hiss. "Someone tried to stabilize the ward with this. That's not basic forgery. That's spell-work meant to replicate your imprint."

I exhaled slowly. "It wasn't the same finesse as the Montseny site. This is cruder. Sloppier. Someone's rushing."

"Or they want you to see it," Daisy said. "Want to provoke you."

I looked at the body again. Christina hadn't deserved this. She'd been quiet, kind, barely involved in the greater circles. The kind of witch who kept her head down. My temper flared. She didn't deserve to die for being connected to me. I thought of my clients, flipping through their names, and landing on Mrs. Gilmore. Would she be next?

"Someone's not just copying me," I said. "They're escalating."

Daisy looked over the scene again, jaw tight. "You still think this is one killer?"

"I think we're dealing with someone powerful enough to plant fakes, but also smart enough to seed chaos. This isn't about covering tracks, it's about creating noise. They want to ensure I get pulled in one way or another." And it would work. Even the Alliance couldn't turn away from these many signs. I wondered when they would haul me in again for questioning. I had to solve the murder before I was locked behind bars permanently. If they were powerful to do all this, they would be powerful enough to end me in an enclosed place.

Daisy glanced at me, "What's on your mind?"

"I'm running out of time. Let's get to the safehouse and try to unravel this mess." Dread pooled in my stomach. I wasn't sure I would be fast enough to uncover this but I had to try.

Back at the safehouse, I unrolled the ledger we'd taken from Emma's stash and matched Christina's name to a transaction. A small protection ward. Basic. The date on it? Same week as a blood debt marker listed to House Corvini. I continued to leaf through the ledger. Two pages later, a sigil I didn't recognize repeated three times. Once next to Emma's name. Once next to Christina's. And once beside mine. The sigil wasn't one I recognize, not fully. But something about the way it spiraled inward, a slow, tightening coil of pressure lines and secondary glyphs, triggered an itch behind my eyes. Like it was designed to be remembered even if you didn't want to. I frowned trying to work it out. The more I stared at it the more my head pounded, until I had to glance away. We sat cross-legged on the concrete floor of the safehouse, the ledger between us, glyph-light flickering across the pages.

"I've seen similar structures," I said slowly, tracing the curve with

my fingertip. “But not in common use. This style, it’s pre-standard warding. The kind they used during the Covenant Wars. Fragmented, layered like shields around a nucleus. It’s intentional. It serves a purpose.”

Daisy leaned over. “This center here. That’s not just ornamental. That’s a key slot.”

“A blood cipher,” I said. “Each sigil is keyed to a specific magical identity. They’re marking people. Cataloging them.”

My blood went cold.

“Someone’s linking us,” I said aloud. “Not just killing witches. They’re connecting the dots. On purpose.”

Daisy’s breath caught. “A registry.”

“No,” I whispered. “A targeting list.”

The pages around us seemed to shiver in the magic-heavy air. I flipped back to Emma’s entry. Then Christina’s. My own. All marked. All circled in red ink that hadn’t faded.

“They’re being watched,” Daisy murmured. “Not just Emma and Christina. Anyone connected to this sigil.”

I nodded, bile rising. “And whoever holds the cipher? They hold the trigger.”

The realization hit hard. This wasn’t random. It wasn’t petty revenge or an isolated vendetta.

Someone was hunting down witches with specific magical profiles, and whatever came next wouldn’t stop at us.

“We need to find out who created this mark,” I said. “And fast. Before they finish crossing names off the list.”

Chapter Seventeen

I chose the site carefully, an abandoned train platform below the Estació de França, long sealed off and warded into bureaucratic obscurity. The shadows hung heavy, thick with forgotten time. A place meant to be lost. A place they wouldn't hesitate to desecrate. It was perfect for my plan. Fake wards. Almost like the real ones. I constructed a ritual site with deliberate flaws, binding glyphs too shallow, anchors offset by just enough to make the pattern look hasty. It had to look authentic, but rushed. Like I was desperate. Like I'd finally made a mistake.

Daisy helped, silent and tense. The fight still hung in the air like static, sparking at the edges of everything we did. We didn't speak much. Just worked side by side, laying the trap with the weight of too many dead women on our backs. I broke the silence first. "You think I'm a monster for doing this."

She paused, a wardstone in her hand. "No," she said. "I think you're scared. And angry. And maybe those two things are sharper in you than they are in most."

"I didn't ask you to stay," I said, not quite looking at her.

"No," she agreed. "But you didn't ask me to leave either."

I glanced over. "That your way of forgiving me?"

"It's my way of helping us survive," she said. "Forgiveness is a longer conversation."

We kept working. Her movements steadier now. Closer.

"You sure they'll take it?" she asked finally.

I checked the resonance of the wardstone. "They've gone to too much trouble to frame me. They want to know what I'm building and they'll come sniffing."

She nodded, eyes shadowed. "Then let's give them something to choke on."

Hours passed. We stayed hidden in a sealed service tunnel nearby, watching the ritual space through a long-scry charm I carved into the wall. The tunnel smelled like mold and old spells. A rat scurried by once, then thought better of it.The waiting pressed on us. I could feel Daisy's energy vibrating with unspoken thoughts. "You ever think about walking away?" she asked quietly.

I kept my eyes on the scry circle. "All the time."

"Why don't you?"

"Because the people who are dead can't," I said. "And someone has

to answer for that."

She was quiet after that. Then, movement. A cloaked figure approached. Slim. Quick. Confident. But careful. They moved like someone who knew wards. Who trusted silence more than spells. The wards hummed, then flickered. A pulse of magic snapped through the air, like someone pressing too hard on a locked door.

"They're testing the outer layer," I murmured. "Looking for authenticity."

Daisy frowned, eyes narrowing. "That reaction timing, it's trained. Military?"

"No," I said, awareness flooding me. "Alliance."

The figure crouched, examined the fake array, and reached for the wardstone. Before they could touch it, they cast a dispel sigil, one I hadn't seen in years. Custom, precise, layered with old field marks I hadn't seen since my hunter days. Rogue agent. The ward collapsed in a puff of ash. Not an explosion, just quiet failure. Intentional and controlled.

My blood went cold.

The air shimmered for half a second, the scent of ozone and scorched sage curling through the tunnel. The cloaked figure flickered out of view, cloak rippling like paper against firelight. One moment there. The next, dust and silence.

"They knew it was fake," Daisy said, stunned, still staring at the now-empty ritual space through the scry window.

"No," I corrected, my voice flat. "They knew *me.*"

I stepped back from the wall, the glow of the glyphs casting stark lines over my face. My stomach twisted. Whoever it was had disabled the trap the same way I would've. The same training. The same instinct. That signature dispel, a signature strike move from our old cell. She looked at me, worry settling into her eyes like stormclouds gathering. "Sanz…what does that mean?"

"It means they were one of us," I said. "One of the Order. One of the hunters."

Daisy's voice was sharp with realization. "Then we're not dealing with just a rogue agent."

"No," I said. "We're dealing with one of *mine.*" The truth settled like ash on my shoulders. I slumped back against the tunnel wall, pulse still erratic. The glyphs I'd laid hummed softly around us, unaware they'd been outmaneuvered. Bypassed. Outclassed. I curled my hands into fists. I wanted to punch something.

Daisy sat beside me, her knee brushing mine. Closer than before. The space between us no longer wary, just weary. No words passed between us for a long moment. The quiet filled with tension and understanding. Then she said, "You were right."

I looked at her.

"This isn't just about you. It's bigger. And I…I was too focused on the damage you could cause to see the damage being done around you."

"I've caused damage," I admitted, voice low. "But I don't want to anymore."

She nodded. "Good. Then let's make sure whoever's doing this can't cause any more either."

We didn't waste time. The spell residue left behind from the dispel sigil was faint, but fresh enough to trace. I snapped open a folded tracking charm from my coat pocket and tuned it to the magical frequency they'd used. The glyph bloomed like a compass rose, its centerline veering east.

"Toward the Gothic Quarter," Daisy murmured. "Figures."

"That's where I would've run," I said. "Dense, magical interference, layered protection spells. The kind of place you can vanish into."

We moved quickly through the tunnels, ascending toward a side exit behind a shuttered café. My body hummed with tension, my wards tightly wound and ready to snap. Daisy kept pace, eyes flicking constantly, hands never far from her knives. We surfaced into the edge of twilight, Barcelona golden and ghosted in orange haze. The Gothic Quarter loomed ahead. And somewhere inside it, one of my former ghosts was waiting. The trail led us through winding alleys veined with old wardstone and secrets. Magic clung to the air like wet ash, thick, stale, and iron-sweet. My tracker charm pulsed once, then dimmed near a wrought-iron gate tucked behind a bookshop façade. The wards layered over it were complex, old-style glyphs, elegant and cruel.

"Emma was here," I said quietly. I could feel her magic, faint and scattered, but real.

Daisy's hand hovered over her dagger. "This is cult work, isn't it?"

I nodded. "The Order leaves magical fingerprints. And this one's a match."

We slipped inside, bypassing the ward shell with a brute-force disarm. The narrow hallway beyond reeked of mold and blood-magic residue. At the far end was a ritual chamber dressed in faded crimson banners and cracked salt circles. Candles long extinguished had melted into the floor like time's ghosts. On the altar, a letter. Folded, sealed with an Order mark. My fingers trembled as I broke the seal.

The parchment inside was thin, worn at the corners. The handwriting was formal. Controlled. Familiar.

Aziza, it read.

You left, but you were never gone.

They never stopped watching you.

Emma tried to reach you. She thought she could undo the damage. But you know better.

Turn yourself in. Or they'll keep cleaning up what you left behind.

It wasn't signed. But I knew the style. Knew the way those threats doubled as regrets. It came from someone high up in the Order. Someone who remembered me as I was. Daisy stood beside me, reading over my shoulder. "They're trying to rattle you."

"They're trying to *lure* me." I folded the letter with slow, careful hands. "They want Aziza back on their terms or not at all."

Outside, the street was still and dim, gold light fading into blue.

"They left that letter to be found," Daisy said. "They knew you'd follow the trail."

"They wanted me to," I said. "They want to push me into revealing myself. Force my hand. Or make me run."

"But you're not running."

I met her gaze. "Not this time."

Because whoever this rogue agent was, whoever pulled the threads that led from Emma to Christina to me, they were playing a long game. And I was done being played.

Chapter Eighteen

The summons came at midnight. A crow with eyes like polished garnet landed on the safehouse balcony, a scroll tied to its leg with silver thread. The seal bore the sigil of House Corvini. The bird stared at me like it knew everything I'd done. Daisy read the scroll first. "They're not asking anymore."

I already knew. You could feel the compulsion woven through the parchment. An invitation shaped like a noose. We arrived at the vampire enclave cloaked in glamour and grit. The half-ruined cloister near Tibidabo loomed like a mausoleum, its stones veined with moonlight and magic. Wards buzzed in the air, thick as fog and older than half the city. The emissary was waiting in the central atrium, beneath a tree with silver leaves that whispered in the wind.

"You kept us waiting," he said.

"I was busy being hunted," I replied.

He smiled, but it didn't reach his eyes. "Then you understand urgency."

He didn't lead me to a chamber or a contract table. Just an altar. And a blade.

"A binding pact," he said. "Old magic. Witnessed by blood."

Daisy stepped forward, tense. "She hasn't agreed to anything."

"I will."

They both turned to me. I felt the weight of it all, every lie, every escape, every compromise I'd made. The guilt clawed at my ribs. I'd run from the cult. Run to escape their control, their blood pacts and mind-breaking rituals. But here I was, offering my blood again. Binding myself, not with loyalty, but with fear and survival. "I'll give you a prototype," I said, "but I don't kneel."

The emissary inclined his head. "A cut of blood, not servitude."

The blade was cold. The cut cleaner than I expected. My blood hit the altar, the runes flaring red-gold. A pact sealed in fear. In power. In necessity. And in shame.

We returned to the safehouse before dawn. My skin still tingled with pact magic, the taste of old blood thick in my mouth like copper regret. Daisy hadn't talked to me the entire way back. I unrolled the blank scroll they'd given me, dragonhide paper that pulsed with latent enchantments. The kind used to archive spells too dangerous to cast. The kind they used in the cult's inner sanctum. The familiarity made bile rise in my throat.

Daisy hovered near the door, her arms crossed. “You really going to build it?”

“I’m going to *fake* it,” I said. But even I didn’t believe it fully.

Because the truth was: I didn’t know. A real soul-binding ward could give me leverage. Could keep me alive. Could stop them. Or it could tip the balance and make me everything I’d fought not to become. I lit a glyph-lantern and began with base linework. Invisibility matrices. Memory-lock spirals. Glyphs to tether thought, intention, and self. With each stroke, I felt my hands become steadier, and my heart sank deeper. I’d once been proud of this craft. Now it felt like sculpting my own cage.

Daisy didn’t say much. She just sat across from me, silent and watchful. Waiting to see which side of myself I’d choose to feed. The side building weapons, or the side terrified to use them.

The scroll was half-filled by the time my hand cramped from drawing. My lines were perfect. Terrible in their precision. I sat in the center of the safehouse’s warded back room, bare stone walls wrapped in layered silencing charms, the floor etched with faded chalk circles from wards long gone stale. The air was thick with exhaustion. My glyph-lantern flickered low, casting slanted shadows that made the room feel smaller with every breath. I wiped ink from my fingers, breath uneven. The edges of the scroll curled slightly from heat and the sheer weight of the spell structure. My wards throbbed from overuse. My blood pact pulsed like a second heartbeat. Every part of me felt raw, wired with power and guilt.

I leaned back against the wall and closed my eyes, letting the weight of the silence crush me. The stone behind me was cold, grounding, but not enough to steady the storm inside.

“Am I becoming them?” I asked softly. My voice cracked.

Daisy looked up. “No. You’re becoming what they’re afraid of.”

“But I’m scared too,” I said. “Scared that I left them, only to become them in another shape. That I keep finding new ways to chain myself.”

She came to sit beside me. Her voice was quiet. “Good. Means you’re still human.”

I shook my head. “What kind of human knows how to carve souls like this? Who trades blood and power like currency?”

The silence again. It wrapped around us like the walls themselves were listening. I thought about fleeing. About burning the scroll. About turning myself in, just to end it all. But none of those were options. Not anymore. Not with the pact. Not with the names already carved into the list.

“They’ve left me no way out,” I whispered.

“Then we make one,” Daisy said.

But I didn’t answer. Because in that silence, I let myself be afraid.
Because what I was building might save me.
Or break me.

Chapter Nineteen

The old fish market near Barceloneta was long abandoned, its iron lattice roof rusted through, its floors cracked from salt and time. Seagulls screamed overhead, dipping low and wheeling out across the water like they knew something was coming. We crouched on the second floor of an old brickwork building across the alley, just high enough to see into the shattered glass windows below. Through the charm-glass scope, I watched two familiar figures, clients I'd once sold minor protection wards to, step into the open loading bay. One of them wore a cloak enchanted to shimmer like smoke, the other carried a briefcase with containment runes etched in glowing red. The kind only used to transport dangerous magic.

"They're trading," I whispered. "Something big."

Daisy shifted beside me, silent but tense. She smelled like steel and citrus. Her knuckles were white on her blade hilt.

I reached for the listening charm sewn into my jacket collar. The voices drifted in, low and careful. One name stood out. Emma.

My breath caught. "They knew her. Maybe even bought from her."

A sudden magical pulse made my skin crawl. The air thickened, like before a summer storm. I looked down just in time to see the briefcase crack open, and the glow inside turn violent.

"No," I breathed. My eyes widened. "It's…"

The blast hit like a scream. A wave of red-hot light erupted from the market's center. Glass shattered. Iron twisted. A soundless roar sent the building's front collapsing inward. I grabbed Daisy by the arm and threw a shield glyph around us just as our windows blew apart. Shards of heat and brick lashed through the room, splintering wood and driving us to the ground. Pain lanced through my shoulder. My ears rang and I tasted blood. The fireball rolled through the alley, curling high into the sky, staining the Barcelona skyline with orange flame and magic-smoke. When I came to, the building creaked like it was trying to remember how to stand. Daisy's hand was on my chest, pushing down a wardstone to keep the rubble from crushing us.

"We're alive," she said, breath ragged. "Barely."

Smoke choked the stairwell. The scent of burning wood and scorched concrete filled my lungs.

I coughed, vision swimming. "They set us up. That wasn't a deal, it was a trap."

Daisy helped me to my feet. The floor was slick with dust and

blood. Somewhere, alarms were beginning to wail, not the city's, but magical, keyed to power levels too high for mortals to ignore.

"They wanted witnesses," she said. "They wanted you dead. Or blamed."

I looked out the shattered window. Fire raged below. People screamed in the distance. And behind it all, I felt the same pulse of magic that had touched our safehouse.

"They're closing in.

We took shelter in a crumbling alchemy shop buried three floors beneath the Gothic Quarter, its threshold guarded by a sentient lock and a charm that made it smell permanently of thyme, char, and regret. The owner, a retired spell-runner named Ori, didn't ask questions. He let us bleed on his rugs and curse into his cauldrons, then locked the doors behind us. Daisy hadn't said much since the blast. But the anger rolled off her like heatwaves. As I traced the lingering scorch marks on my shoulder, she finally spoke.

"They're baiting you, and it's working."

"I know."

"So let's flip the board."

I glanced up. Her eyes were bloodshot, her hair a singed mess. But she looked steady. Ready.

We sketched the plan together over broken bread and warded parchment. I'd trace the magic residue left by the briefcase using a contraband sigil mirror, dangerous and illegal. One issue. It was locked in an Alliance cache under Plaça Reial. We'd need to break in.

"And after?" Daisy asked.

"We leak misinformation," I said. "Make them think I'm delivering the prototype, early. Let them come."

"And then we burn them." Her voice was like steel.

Night fell like spilled ink. We moved through the lower tunnels beneath the city, silent as breath, avoiding scry points and weaving past sleeping sigils. The cache vault shimmered beneath a glamoured wine cellar, guarded by a rotating tripglyph. Daisy cracked the mechanical locks while I whispered to the wards, feeding them just enough truth to let us pass. Inside, the air was still and cold, preserved by magic. Cabinets held sealed scrolls, cursed weapons, and captured enchantments. We found the mirror in a velvet-lined box marked with the old Order symbol. A warning. I was sick of them. I touched it, and a familiar ache pulsed through my hand. The sigil on the mirror matched the bomb.

We almost made it out clean, until a pressure spell tripped and the alley beyond lit up. They came fast. Two, assailants. Masks, cloaks, short blades. Daisy fought like a storm, brandishing an assortment of magic and weapons. I drew out my slingshot and fired wardstones at

them They twisted and turned away, shielding themselves from my attacks. One of them raised his hands and threw something at me. I ducked to the ground before it could hit my chest, and it rocked against the wall behind me.

I looked at the parting gift behind me, a glyph burned into the alley wall.

I froze.

“What’s wrong?” Daisy asked, seeing my reaction.

“That was my mentor’s mark.”

“What does that mean?”

“I don’t know.”

Back in Ori’s shop, I sat on the floor, mirror cradled in my lap, hands shaking.

The glyph etched into the stone wall kept burning in my mind. It wasn’t just any Order symbol. It was the personal crest of Seraphine, the woman who had trained me. Raised me like a weapon.

“They’ve made it personal,” I said.

Daisy nodded, wiping blood from her cheek. “So we make it personal back.”

I looked at her. “What do they fear most?”

She didn’t hesitate. “You.”

I smiled, tired but sure. “Then let’s give them something to be afraid of.””

Chapter Twenty

We staged the meeting near the ruins of a burned-out cathedral on the outskirts of El Poblenou. The skeletal remains of its bell tower clawed at the sky, stone scorched black and brambles twisting through its broken arches. Wind hissed through hollow windows like whispered prayers lost to time. The prototype scroll, half-real and half-bluff, was sealed in a containment ward humming with spectral light and strung tight across my back like a sacrificial offering. I could feel it pulsing with every step I took, reactive, alert, and nearly alive. It smelled faintly of ozone, burnt parchment, and something older I couldn't name.

Daisy perched high in the fractured bell tower, what was left of I, with a long-distance sigil launcher primed and glowing faintly blue. From her vantage, she had a perfect line of sight to every shadow in the nave.

I stood alone in the center of the cathedral ruins, surrounded by broken pews and ash, the stone beneath my boots etched with crumbled ward lines that once held faith. Now they held a trap.

They came just before midnight. Four cloaked figures, moving in silence, boots whispering across the blackened marble. The lead wore Seraphine's glyph like a crown, woven in silver thread across her chest.

I didn't run. I had nowhere left to run.

The first hex came from the left. A flicker of violet fire. It was fast and mean. I twisted, deflecting with a snap of my slingshot and a kinetic wardstone. The recoil jolted up my arm, snapping through muscle and bone like a live wire. From above, Daisy unleashed a thunderclap sigil. The sky cracked white-blue as it struck, shattering the glamor of one cloaked attacker and sending him reeling across the broken flagstones.

Then the others surged.

They came in tight formation, blades drawn, magic crackling like a hive of angry wasps. I recognized the tactics. I had bled with this pattern. It was efficient, brutal, and drilled into our bones back when we trained to be invisible and merciless. A whip of fire lashed past my cheek. I ducked and retaliated with a blast of pulse flare, light and sound concentrated into a staggering force. It caught one of them in the chest, dropping them hard.

The second was faster. She dodged the flare, lunged, and nearly

opened my shoulder to the bone.

“Sanz!” Daisy’s voice screamed over the comm-stone, hoarse and raw. “They’re trying to drive you out, herd you!”

“I know!” I shouted, teeth gritted, pivoting around a collapsed pillar. “Let them!”

We reached the edge of the cathedral grounds, where I’d buried the real trap beneath centuries of charred soil and dead salt. The air turned sharp as I dropped the veil, revealing the sigils etched into the earth, lines carved with my blood, tuned to one frequency alone: Order resonance.

The magic ignited with a roar like metal torn from stone.

Two attackers collapsed mid-step, their own power rebounding against them in a burst of inverted force. One screamed as a binding glyph seared across his chest. The other curled into a silent heap, knocked unconscious by the overload.

Only Seraphine remained.

She stepped forward, untouched, mask of bone and gold gleaming beneath the broken moonlight. Her cloak snapped in the sudden wind, but her posture didn’t waver. She raised one gloved hand and beckoned.

“Come home, Aziza,” she said, voice calm and cold as the grave. “You’ve never stopped being ours.”

The words gutted me. I could feel every thread she was tugging, every scar she’d left. My breath caught. My wards flexed hard enough to sting.

And for the first time, I let the truth out.

“I never belonged to you.”

And then I hurled the soul-binding prototype straight into the center of the ward.

It exploded.

Not violently, but brilliantly, light bloomed like fire and memory, washing the night in radiant silence. Sigils flared. The broken cathedral glowed like the bones of something divine.

When the smoke cleared, I stood alone amid the still-burning runes.

Seraphine staggered, half-blinded, mask cracked down the center. For the first time in years, she looked afraid.

The cathedral groaned like it was about to collapse, but Seraphine didn’t run. She straightened slowly, her mask split down the middle, one eye gleaming with fury. Blood, real or magical, I couldn’t tell, ran down her jawline, staining the ivory with red.

The ground beneath my feet vibrated. I felt the shift in the air before I saw it, her casting.

“You think you’ve won something?” she hissed.

With a flick of her hand, glyphs exploded into being beneath us, glyphs I hadn't laid.

Daisy shouted from above, warning me, but it was too late. Seraphine had prepared her own trap. The runes she summoned were old, layered with pain and memory. They twisted into shape midair, threading through the cathedral ruins like vines on fire. I raised my hands, forming a counter-lattice just in time to keep them from flaying me open.

Magic collided, hers a cold, precise blade; mine a wild, beating drum. The sound cracked stone. Light split the night sky.

Daisy dropped from the tower in a controlled fall, sigil knives blazing, cutting through the edge of the spell pattern. It gave me the seconds I needed. I roared and surged forward, anchoring a binding glyph into Seraphine's shoulder. She screamed, not from pain, but rage. Her hand snapped out, and I felt my name unspool on her tongue in a curse that tasted like home and hatred.

We didn't kill her. She vanished in the chaos, dragging one of her downed agents with her. But she left something behind, a burn mark in the shape of my ward. Corrupted. Broken. It was a message and a promise.

Daisy helped me back to my feet, her own arms trembling from spell strain.

"She's not done," I said, voice raw.

"No," Daisy answered, eyes narrowing. "But neither are we."

Chapter Twenty-One

We didn't run. Instead, I reached for the one thing the Order feared most, exposure.

Within hours, I crafted a spell that wrapped a truth glyph around my voice, one that carried not just words, but memories. Daisy and I broadcasted the raw testimony of Emma's ledger, the glyph traces, and the fragments of the prototype to every magical node in the city. Magical graffiti bloomed across rooftops. Underground spell-networks lit up with our truth. The message was simple: The Order was back. They were hunting their own. And I wasn't running anymore.

Backlash came quick.

Shifters who'd once turned their backs on me reached out. Witches offered sanctuary I hadn't asked for. Laurie and George offered their market resources at reduced rates. Even a vampire courier brought word that House Corvini was now "re-evaluating its alliances."

Alliance agents started asking questions. The same agent that had taken me into the interrogation room passed by to officially let me know that I was no longer considered a suspect in the murder of Emma Dench. Her relative did not show up.

I was done hiding.

Daisy stood beside me atop a parking deck that overlooked the Gothic Quarter. Barcelona's night shimmered with tension.

"What now?" she asked.

I unrolled a ward-stone etched with my sigil and Seraphine's. Half-light, half-shadow.

"I make a final offer," I said. "Her terms or mine."

"Which do you think she'll choose?"

I smiled grimly. "She won't get the chance."

Thank you for diving into the world of Valentina Sanz. I hope you enjoyed meeting her and want to join her on her next adventures. Sign up for my newsletter at www.fatimafayez.com/subscribe/ for book news, and updates. Continue the series with *Dead Wolf*:

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